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THE CAMERONIANS

A NOVEL

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'THE ROMANCE OF WAR

LONDON
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THE DUKE OF ALBANY'S OWN HIGHLANDERS
THE CAMERONIANS

TO

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE, ESQ.,

MY OLD FRIEND AND PUBLISHER,

I INSCRIBE THIS MILITARY STORY,

AS A TRIBUTE

OF

RESPECT AND ESTEEM.

PREFACE.

THE old Scottish regiment from which the following story takes its title, and of which the hero is described as a member, has now lost much of its identity, as in the July of 1881 it was united with the 90th Perthshire Light Infantry, as 'The Scottish Cameronian Rifles,' thus losing, of course, its scarlet uniform, colours, and facings—the royal yellow of Scotland, which, by a correspondence with Mr. Childers, in March that year, the author was fortunate enough to secure (instead of buff) for all Scottish infantry, not faced with blue.

Of the merits of the new regimental system it is difficult to speculate as yet; but it will too probably create an endless confusion, and be long a source of regret to the entire army.

25, TAVISTOCK ROAD,
WESTBOURNE PARK.
April, 1882

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THE CAMERONIANS.

CHAPTER I.

EAGLESCRAIG.

'TWENTY-SIXTH Regiment,' said the old general, raising his voice, as he rustled the morning paper importantly, after taking it from the ebony reading-easel (attached to the arm of his large and comfortable velvet easy-chair), whereon Mr. Tunley, the butler, always laid the journals, after he had duly aired and cut them. 'Twenty-sixth Regiment,' he added, coughing and clearing his voice; 'a detachment of this distinguished corps, says the *Ayr Observer*, has recently arrived at the castle of Dumbarton, under the command of Lieutenants Cecil Falconer and Leslie Fotheringhame.'

'Well, there is nothing remarkable in that, uncle,' said one of his young lady listeners, who seemed chiefly intent upon her breakfast, and not much interested by the intelligence.

'My old regiment—my old regiment still,' said the old man musingly. 'Gad, I'll have the senior—what's his name? Cecil Falconer—over here, for a few days' cover-shooting.'

'And why not the other too?' asked the young lady who had just spoken, laughingly; 'we might have an admirer each, Annabelle.'

But Miss Erroll, to whom the name of Fotheringhame seemed not unknown, coloured and did not reply.

'Both could not leave their men at the same time,' said the general.

'Then I hope the senior is a pleasant fellow—he whom you

propose to bring, Sir Piers,' said Mr. Hew Montgomerie, of whom more anon.

'All the Cameronians were pleasant fellows in *my* time,' said the general tartly, 'and I have no doubt they are so still. And remember, girls, that the smartest officers are usually selected for detachment duty,' he added.

These remarks passed in the cosy and elegant morning-room of Eaglescraig, the mansion of Sir Piers Montgomerie, Bart., who—a retired general officer—was G.C.B. and G.C.S.I. and Colonel of the Cameronian Regiment, and Governor of the Castle of Dumbarton: and the party at breakfast consisted only of Sir Piers, his remote kinsman and heir, Hew Montgomerie, of the Indian Civil Service, home on a year's leave; his grandniece and orphan ward Mary, also a Montgomerie; her friend Annabelle Erroll—both very handsome girls—and an old lady who presided over the silver tea-urn and Wedgwood breakfast equipage, Mrs. Garth, Mary's governess and friend, the widow of an old captain of the Cameronians—five personages with whom we hope to make the reader fully acquainted in time.

Sir Piers was verging now on his seventieth year, but he was fresher and more hale and hearty than many a man of fifty. His features were still handsome and regular, though lined and wrinkled; his eyes were keen as those of a hawk, and his figure, still wonderfully erect, was clad in a rich maroon-coloured robe-de-chambre, with yellow silk facings, cord, and tassels, and he was seated near the blazing winter fire, with his feet on a velvet stool, and encased in slippers of Mary's handiwork.

Generous by nature, yet hot-tempered and proud—pride of birth had been a positive vice with him in early life—Sir Piers was a curious mixture of the testy old Indian general, accustomed to every luxury, including tyrannising over 'niggers,' with the country gentleman of the old school; and having a profound admiration for the service and everything pertaining thereto, like old Bismarck, he believed that every man should be a soldier and rejoice in being one.

In his latter years Sir Piers had not been with the Cameronians, but had seen a deal of service in India as a general officer, and, while slowly creeping up the list of his rank, had been appointed, in the usual courtesy of the army, full colonel of the old regiment in which he had been a subaltern and field-officer.

His hunting-days were well-nigh past now; yet, at a meet, all the field rejoiced to see the fine old man in his saddle, and with all his pride of bearing—for a wealthy *parvenu*, however honestly he had won his wealth, Sir Piers would have treated with chilling hauteur—he was never above conversing with some sturdy farmer of Kyle or Cunninghame, kindly and affably, on the price of stock, the fall of wheat, on breeding, fattening, or draining, and always winding up by some, often irrelevant, anecdote of his sporting experiences in India, or when he followed the drums of the Cameronians. Old as he was, he had never been known to shrink from a bullfinch, or be fished out of a brook; he was welcome in every homestead throughout the country-side, and the farmers' wives always assumed their brightest looks, brought forth their whitest table-cloths and the best contents of larder and pantry, in honour of the old Laird of Eaglescraig, when he came their way.

He was a Justice of the Peace and Commissioner of Supply for the County; he read the *Field*, of course, as what country gentleman does not? He studied the War Office *Gazette* regularly, as if he expected his own name to appear there, once weekly; he was simple in all his tastes and happy in all his surroundings, yet, for all that, there was a skeleton in his house and heart, known, perhaps, to himself alone.

He was a childless man now—childless by an act of his own—and the title and estates, which he inherited from a long line of ancestors, were eventually to pass from him to the heir of entail, whom he strove hard, but in vain, to like or admire.

The latter, Hew Caddish Montgomerie, was then about thirty years of age. He was not ungentlemanly either in manner or bearing; but his face, like his disposition, was very defective. His eyes were called grey, and seemed to be grey

at times; yet, on closer inspection, it was but too apparent that those shifty and furtive orbs of his were of different colours, for one was a species of bilious green.

They were closely set on each side of a nose that strongly resembled a shoe-horn, and his mouth, which was both cruel and licentious in contour, was partly concealed, or altered in expression, by a luxuriant brown moustache. He had come home, we have said, on leave from the C. S., a sharp hand at cards and with a billiard-cue, deeply dipped in debt, and with the current reputation among his set of being 'a bad lot.' His mother, daughter of a Sudder judge, was one of the old English family of Caddish, a name which Hew was wont to affirm was a corruption of Cavendish; be that as it may, the corruption thereof, in some instances, suited his character amazingly well.

'This is rather unlike your usual proud exclusiveness, Sir Piers,' said he, after a pause.

'What? inviting this young officer to knock over a few birds?'

'Yes—without an introduction.'

'Introduction? None was needed in *my* time; the epaulettes were introduction enough everywhere. The service is certainly *not* what it was in my day, the special school of honour and politeness; but I'll do the right thing for all that. Let me see, which is senior—Falconer or Fotheringhame. Tunley, hand me the "Army List." Thanks. It *is* Falconer. I have known what it is to be on detachment in such a dull hole as Dumbarton, killing time till the spring drills come on, so I'll invite the senior.'

'And how about the poor junior?' asked Miss Erroll, colouring slightly again.

'Well, even to gratify you, Annabelle, I cannot bring him,' said the general, laughing. 'I remember once, when we were in cantonments at Barrackpore——' Hew smiled as the general began thus; but they were spared the probable prosy reminiscence, for just then Sir Piers' faded features clouded suddenly, as he put down the 'Army List' and said, in a

changed voice: 'Had my boy Piers lived, he might now have been at the head of the regiment—five-and-twenty years ago—five-and-twenty years! My God, how long—how time has rolled away!'

His eyes, as he thought this, rather than spoke it all aloud, were cast for a moment furtively—as if he was ashamed of exhibiting any sudden emotion—on the full-length portrait of a handsome young subaltern, in the uniform of the Cameronians, scarlet faced with yellow, massive gold epaulettes, and the silver sphinx on his belt-plate. It represented a spirited-looking young fellow with a proud and joyous expression of face, and a well-knit, well-set-up figure.

The shifty parti-coloured eyes of Hew Montgomerie travelled for a moment in the same direction, and then he addressed himself to the grouse-pie, thinking the while that 'things were deucedly well ordered as they were, so far as *he* was concerned.' And then the meal proceeded somewhat silently, Mrs. Garth officiating over the cups, and Mr. Tunley, a paragon of old rubicund butlers, at the side-board, where the cold beef and grouse-pie were placed, among Indian jars and old silver race tankards.

Mary Montgomerie, the general's grand-niece and ward, and her chief friend and gossip, Annabelle Erroll, were both attractive and very handsome girls, each in her twentieth year, but different in their styles and complexions.

Of a good stature, and round, firm, and graceful in form, Mary Montgomerie had well-defined eyebrows, eyes, and hair, all of the darkest brown; long lashes lent a great softness to her white-lidded eyes, and she had a quiet ease, elegance, and girlish innocence of manner; yet at times she was full of vivacity, born of the fact or knowledge that she had been, as an orphan, from her youth, much of a petted child, and reminded by many around her that she was the heiress of many a thousand and many an acre, provided that she wedded with the full approval of one who was not likely to be severe upon her—old Sir Piers, her grand-uncle and legal guardian; for she was

the only daughter of his favourite younger brother—younger by several years.

As such she filled a void in his heart, and ever and anon the old man's eyes were wont to rest kindly, fondly, and admiringly upon her.

Her complexion was fair and creamy, her features regular and minute, yet they were hardly ever in repose, for every variety of expression, as thought inspired it, flitted over the ever-changing face.

Though less favoured by fortune, and even by nature, her friend Miss Erroll was nevertheless a charming girl of the blonde type, with grey-blue eyes, and fair hair shot with gold, as it seemed, in the sunlight, soft, plentiful, and wavy as the darker tresses of Mary, and her eye-brows and their lashes were just a shade darker than her hair. In the tone and tenour of her ways she was less impulsive than Mary Montgomerie, who at times would come down the house stairs at a headlong rush, while Annabelle followed with calm step and slow, or would quietly seek a gate in the hunting-field, while Mary, with her horse's head uplifted by her light, unerring hand, cleared the nearest hedge at a flying leap, and with a laugh that rang like a merry silver bell.

Both girls were eminently graceful and full of charming manners and pretty winning words and ways; but the difference of their temperaments was indicated even by the style of their morning-dresses, for the robe of Annabelle was pale blue, as became the character of her beauty, while that of Mary was of warm maize colour, tied with fluttering scarlet ribbons, with rosettes of the same to match on her tiny slippers. The loose, wide, falling sleeves of this garment coquettishly showed her round white arm at times, from the taper wrist to the dimpled elbow, and then she would smile and hastily let them fall forward when she caught the quick, shifty eyes of Hew Montgomerie cast admiringly on her.

The fifth of our *dramatis personæ*, as yet, is Mrs. Griselda Garth, or, as she preferred to be called with the old Scoto-

French courtesy, that is now passing away, 'Mrs. Captain Garth.' The widow of a Cameronian officer who had died on service in the East, a calm, subdued, and gentle white-haired old lady, she had found now, for life, a quiet home at Eaglescraig, and had acted for more than twelve years as a species of tender mother to Mary; and thus, after her duties as a governess were past, she remained as her mentor, companion, and chaperon, honoured, loved, and trusted by Mary and old Sir Piers, who had been her husband's friend.

'If Mr. Falconer avails himself of my invitation, and I don't see very well how he can decline it,' said the latter, returning to his late idea, and viewing it somewhat in the light of a regimental order, 'the dog-cart can meet him at the Montgomerie Arms in Ardrossan; and you, Hew, will do me the favour to drive him here to Eaglescraig.'

'Yes; that will be in better taste than sending a servant,' added Mary.

'Excuse me, Sir Piers,' said Hew, almost sulkily, as his chronic jealousy already took the alarm; 'but I don't care for acting as charioteer to a total stranger.'

'As you please,' replied Sir Piers haughtily, as he always disliked to have his wishes thwarted; 'some one else will obey my orders, I have no doubt.'

Eaglescraig, in the Bailiwick of Cunninghame, we may describe as a magnificent modern villa, with plate-glass oriels, a pillared portico, a stately perron, and balustraded terrace, whereon the peacocks spread their plumes and strutted to and fro. It had been, somewhat incongruously we must admit, added to, or engrafted on, the tall, old, square baronial tower that for ages had been, from the lofty bluff known as the Eaglescraig, a landmark of the sea, and which started up gaunt and grim, with grated windows, corbelled battlements, and tourelles at the angles—a tower the pride of the general's heart as the cradle of his house, and the home of his ancestors, all unsuited though it was to modern usages, taste, and requirements—an edifice so massive and old, that Hardy Knute,

when he dwelt in the adjacent castle of Glengarnock, may have shared in it the hospitality of that Sir Hew Montgomerie who fought at the battle of Largs, and whose coat-of-arms, three *fleurs-de-lis*, with three *annulets* quarterly, crested by a maiden holding a man's head, may still be seen above its northern door; and these Sir Piers had now reproduced upon everything else, from the carriage panels to the dogs' collars and the salt-spoons.

On one side the house of Eaglescraig commanded a view which, on a summer day, was a delightful one, when there was just breeze enough to swell the passing sails—the glorious Firth of Clyde, with the dark-blue peaks of Arran in the distance, widening out into the ocean, with ships homeward bound after many a tedious, rough, or prosperous voyage; others with their prows turned towards the far horizon, bearing with them, perhaps, expatriated Highland emigrants, their hearts filled with sorrow and regret, rather than with the thoughts of 'high emprise' so necessary for an exile's success in the doubtful future.

Close in shore, below the beetling cliff, when the wind is from the land, may be seen the many coasting vessels and steamers plying to and fro, shooting clear, as if by magic, from many a rocky promontory and bluff, where, thick as gnats, the sea-birds wheel and scream; and in many a sheltered cove the boats, brown-tarred and clinker-built, moored or safely beached, for the people there are all hardy and thrifty fisher-folk.

But on the landward side the view was different, and there the eye could wander over the tolerably flat and very fertile acres of Sir Piers Montgomerie, wood, wold and pasture, the richest part, perhaps, of the rich dairy-farm producing land in a district of which, as the old rhyme says:

'Kyle for a man,
And Carrick for a coo;
Cunninghame for butter and cheese,
And Galloway for woo'.'

So the general's invitation to Lieutenant Cecil Falconer was

written by Mary and despatched, to the great annoyance of Hew, and all in Eaglescraig knew that in another day or two the recipient thereof, who had accepted it, was coming.

Mary Montgomerie and her friend Annabelle Erroll were too much accustomed to society, and the gaiety of fashionable life, to feel even any girlish excitement at the prospect of a young sub being added to their present small circle at Eaglescraig; nevertheless, in the seclusion of their dressing-closet, it was voted and passed by them, *nem. con.*, that the said addition would not be unacceptable; and, on lot being laughingly cast as to whom he should fall a victim, the prize was Mary's.

And after this they ceased to think upon the subject—certainly, at least, so far as the latter lady was concerned.

CHAPTER II.

HEW'S LOVE-MAKING.

During the few days that passed before the arrival of the expected guest at Eaglescraig, Hew was more than usually attentive to the general's wealthy ward; and one forenoon, when they were idling in the long avenue which led through the Dovecot Park down to the woodland slope towards the highway, he resolved, if possible, to bring matters to a successful issue with her.

For fully a month past, since his appearance at Eaglescraig, Mary had been used to this love-making of his, apparently, as she treated him half coquettishly, and yet so 'chaffingly,' that —but for his extreme vanity, or obtuseness—he must have seen that he had no chance of success.

Mary valued his attentions at their real worth, and times there were when he eyed her gloomily—yea, angrily, for he trusted more in Sir Piers' influence, wishes, and authority, to bend her to his will, than to any merit of his own.

Thus his love-making was a curious combination of earnest-

ness, banter, and sullenness; earnestness caused by the girl's great beauty, which he certainly valued, and her great wealth, which he valued much more, on the one hand; and on the other, genuine dislike of India, with his own impecunious circumstances, and a knowledge of Sir Piers' wishes. The banter came at times, because he was really incapable of loving any girl truly; and the sullenness was born of his lack of success, with a chronic jealousy of every other man who addressed her.

On this forenoon in the Dovecot Park, Annabelle Erroll did not accompany them, so Hew proceeded to utilise the occasion.

Mary looked bewitchingly beautiful and piquante in her rich brown sealskin, a grey skirt, and a coquettish black velvet hat with a scarlet feather. She kept her hands obstinately in her tiny muff; thus Hew had no pretence for capturing one of them in any way as a suggestive preliminary to something more, and could only walk by her side and utter his soft nothings from time to time, to which she listened, half amused and half bored the while, and not helping him in any way.

The winter day was clear and bright, and the keen gusty breeze that swept from the sea over Eaglescraig imparted a rosebud tint to Mary's usually pale cheeks that enhanced her beauty by adding a fresh light to her eyes. The gusts of wind whirled showers of yellow and brown leaves across the sward, and drifts of stormy clouds through the sky over land and Firth, yet Mary's spirits were at high pressure, and though but little sunshine lit the December landscape, she was full of merriment and the *espièglerie* that was natural to her.

The dovecot they were approaching, like most of the ancient edifices of that kind in Scotland, was built in the form of an enormous beehive, some twenty feet high, and full of columbaria for the pigeons, which were flying in clouds around it, or perched on the summit thereof. It was, in due conformity to an ancient act of the Scottish Parliament, placed in the very centre of the Montgomerie estate, so that the birds should not

prey upon the corn of other proprietors; and the reason why so many of these antique dovecots in Scotland survive the mansions to which they belonged, is supposed to be an old superstition that if the dovecot is destroyed, the lady of the land dies within the year.

Near that of Eaglescraig are two large yellow rings or circles strongly marked in the green-sward (like those on the hill of Craiganrarie), drawn by the sword of an evil Montgomerie, who had trafficked in Satanic influence, and thus had formed round him an orbit of protection, before summoning his sable majesty, and round which the latter had to keep running so long as he was visible to mortal eyes.

'You do worry me, Hew,' said Mary, with something of a saucy laugh, 'and I have every mind to stand in the conjuror's circle and defy you to approach me.'

'Do you deem me, then, so distasteful, so odious, and such an incarnation of evil?'

'No; but seriously, what is the aim, the object of all this attention, Cousin Hew? for though the tie is a remote one certainly, I may call you cousin, I believe.'

'Do, dearest Mary.'

'Well?' she asked, curtly and impatiently.

'The aim and object, you say?'

'Yes, yes.'

'To marry you, of course; that is—that is, if you will have me, and please Sir Piers,' he replied, with perfect deliberation, and more apparent coolness than he usually felt.

'I won't consult grand-uncle on *that* matter, Cousin Hew. Besides, now that I think of it, I don't want to marry.'

'Indeed! I thought marriage was the sole aim of every girl's existence.'

'In novels more than in real life, perhaps. Besides, marriage is only to be thought of when the man and the hour come.'

'It is the end of all anxieties,' urged Hew, who thought no doubt of his monetary ones.

'I have none to end; and with many girls it is only the

beginning of a set of troubles which none of them expect. But let us drop this very funny conversation.'

'Why?'

'You surely would not seek a wife with half a heart, or none?'

'The half of your heart, Mary, is worth the whole of any other woman's!' replied Hew, with more warmth and gallantry than he had yet shown; but the provoking Mary only laughed, and as she drew near the dovecot, some of the pigeons, to whom her figure was familiar, and whom she was wont to bring food for, came wheeling and fluttering round her, and one, after nestling in her neck—a pretty sight—alighted on her left hand, and while she stroked and fed it with the right, Hew could not but remark that the snow-white pigeon was not whiter than her slender fingers.

'I would I were that pigeon,' said he sentimentally.

'"Would I were a glove upon that hand!"—now don't be a goose and attempt to act Romeo, as I cannot be your Juliet,' said Mary, laughing outright; and now he began to eye her with his gloomiest expression in his parti-coloured orbs, while she caressed the bird, and sang, as if to it, part of Lady Anne Lindsay's song:

'"Why tarries my love? Ah, where does he roam?
My love is long absent from me.
Come hither, sweet dove, I'll write to my love,
And send him a letter by thee.

'"Her dove she did deck, she drew o'er his neck
A bell and a collar so gay;
She tied to his wing a scroll with a string,
Then kissed him and sent him away."'

Suiting the action to the word, she kissed the pigeon and tossed it from her with a merry ringing laugh, for she had ever a light glad heart, and was full of pretty, yet haughty and winsome ways.

Hew, in the vanity of his nature, could not see how hopeless it was for him to press his suit with a girl who never listened to him seriously, and who never tried, even in the least degree, to care for him; for there was something in Hew Caddish Mont-

gomerie that made Mary totally indifferent to all he could urge, and so she felt neither regret for nor gratitude to him: thus she could hear unmoved the avowal and proposal from his lips, which seldom fail to stir in one way or another the hearts of most women, and which, whoever utters them, are seldom or never forgotten.

'Let us be friends, Hew,' said she, in reply to another appeal; 'I do not love you—I cannot love you as you wish, and I dare not and would not marry where I did not love.'

Hew eyed her still more gloomily and almost revengefully, while she played with the spray of a wild-rose tree, till a little cry escaped her, as a thorn entered her delicate hand.

'Do permit me, Mary,' he urged, and tenderly enough he extracted the thorn, and bowing over her hand, pressed it to his lips; but Mary almost angrily snatched it away, just as the sound of wheels was heard, and there bowled up the winding avenue a dog-cart, the driver and the occupant of which must have seen, and no doubt misunderstood, the whole situation.

'Our new guest with his gun-case and portmanteaus,' said Hew, with much annoyance.

'Who?' asked Mary, still more annoyed, as she thought of what Hew had done.

'Have you forgotten?'

'Oh! you mean Mr. Cecil Falconer.'

'Yes, that fellow from Dumbarton. Now don't, please, run off to the house, Mary; we shall meet him and his military appetite betimes, no doubt, when the gong sounds for dinner.'

Mary had now an undefined sense of provocation, and in silence turned away towards the house, accompanied by Hew, who found his chance was gone for that day, and Mary never gave him another if it could be avoided.

Thus ere long he began to fear that until Sir Piers' demise, and the baronetcy and broad acres of Eaglescraig became his by succession, he might have to face the Indian C.S. again; and seek how to meet his debts by trying—as he had often done—his fortune at 'the board of green cloth.'

CHAPTER III.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

THE sense of having borne a part in a *scene*—an event which is dreaded by well-bred folks—prevented Mary from making her appearance till dinner-time, when, after achieving a most effective toilette, she entered the lighted drawing-room.

Though almost totally unembarrassed by any memory of Hew's absurd love-making, she had nevertheless been provoked that the new guest should have been cognisant of his gallantry in the avenue. She could but hope that he had forgotten it, which was certainly not the case, and ere she had left her dressing-closet, she paused before the pier-glass to peep at her own sweet face and all her bravery, ere she swept away down the great staircase to the drawing-room, where already the general and their visitor were on the best of terms, laughing and, as Mrs. Garth phrased it, 'talking shop in full swing.'

'Yes, yes,' she heard Sir Piers saying, 'it was there at the storming of that hill-fort that the notable dispute took place between Douglas of "Ours" and Bruce of the Bengal Infantry, as to which was senior and *who* should lead the stormers; till Douglas, when the bullets, egad! were flying like hail down the breach, lowered his sword and said, "When a Bruce is to lead, a Douglas may be proud to follow; lead on, and I shall follow you!" He was shot down a minute after, and the next who was knocked over was your good-man, Mrs. Garth—poor John! Ah! my niece,' he interrupted himself, on seeing the suddenly arrested gaze of their guest. 'Mr. Falconer of "Ours," Mary—Miss Montgomerie.'

Mary gave him her hand and a smile of welcome, and was at once put at her ease, as Sir Piers resumed his anecdote, to which, though she had heard it a hundred times before, Mrs. Garth listened with rapt attention, as became an 'old campaigner,' while Annabelle Erroll, who seemed already to have discovered that she and Mr. Falconer had some friend or

friends in common, was conversing away with more than her usual fluency and animation.

'Is she already smitten by our new sub?' thought Mary.

Falconer had certainly a striking face and a striking figure, and both were well calculated to please a woman's eye. In plain but accurate evening costume, the funereal costume of festive civilisation, he seemed every inch a gentleman and a handsome fellow; calm, self-possessed, and in about his twenty-fifth year; soldier-like, perfectly well-bred, and, as it eventually proved, well-read and a skilful musician.

His nose was somewhat aquiline; his eyes and close-shaven hair were, like Mary's, of the darkest brown, and his moustaches, as Annabelle afterwards whispered to her, were 'the perfection' of such appendages. He had a placid and perfectly assured manner, very different from Hew's alternate restlessness and *insouciance*; yet his eyes bespoke a latent fire of character and a spirit that was full of courage and energy; and now Hew, who had been preparing for the coming meal by having either sherry and bitters, or a hideous compound called a 'cocktail,' which he had taught the butler, Tunley, to make up, came lounging in, with scrutiny and gloom in his eyes, to complete the little circle grouped near the fire.

By nature suspicious and envious, he barely accorded their visitor a touch of his hand, and from that moment these two young men felt—they knew not why—an instinctive dislike of each other.

The dinner-gong cut short another anecdote of the general's, and recalled his thoughts from pig-sticking and Central India; he gave, with courtly old-fashioned politeness, his arm to Mrs. Garth; Mary took that of Cecil Falconer, and smiling Annabelle Erroll fell to the lot of the amiable Hew, while Mr. Tunley and the servants drew up rank entire in the vestibule; then, of course, the meal that followed was like any other in such an establishment, perfect, from the soup and dry sherry to the cofee and Maraschino.

'Tunley,' said Sir Piers, 'fill Mr. Falconer's glass. Glad to

welcome you to Eaglescraig,' he added, bowing over a brimming glass of sherry; 'glad, indeed, to welcome one of my old Cameronians. I hope that, like me, you are proud of the old corps?'

'I am, indeed, Sir Piers!' responded the young fellow with a kindling eye, that doubtless, like his heart, brightened under the genial and charming influences of his surroundings. 'I share, sir, to the full, the opinion of some one who says that no soldier is worth his salt unless he feels that he is as good as any man about him, and twice as good as any opposed to him.'

'Bravo, Falconer! you are one after my own heart! Gad, but he is a fine fellow,' he added in a low voice to Mrs. Garth; 'reminds me powerfully of some one I knew, long ago. *Who* the deuce can it be?'

In the extremity of his kindness at that moment, he actually thought him like his dead son, so the old man's whole heart went out to the new-comer, in whose favour this fanciful idea operated powerfully. 'His father and mother have long been dead, I understand, and he joined the Cameronians fresh from school—a mere boy, as I did myself.'

He looked almost tenderly on the young man, who was quite unconscious that he was an object of any particular interest; and his eyes kindled, but a sigh escaped as he recalled his own hot youth, and

> 'Thought of the days that were long since gone by,
> When his limbs were strong and his courage was high,

and ere his once firm and stately stride had given place to what he called 'a species of half-pay shamble.'

'By the way, Falconer,' said Sir Piers, whose pet weakness was pedigree, 'there was an old family of your name, who had an estate in this Bailiwick of Cunninghame—perhaps you are a branch of it?'

The young man coloured rather perceptibly (as Mew was not slow to perceive and make a note of), and said with a smile:

'I was educated out of Scotland; my father died in my

youth, and my mother set no store on such fortuitous things as name or pedigree.'

'A sad mistake,' said Sir Piers, shaking his white head. 'The Falconers I speak of were a branch of the Falconers, lords of Halkertoun, who took their name from their office, being falconers to our kings of old, as we learn from Douglas—aye, so far back as the twelfth century.'

'I know not, general, of what Falconers I come,' replied the young officer, a little curtly; then he added, with a smile: 'I only know that I was not born with the proverbial silver spoon, but with a wooden one, of the largest size.'

Sir Piers felt intuitively that he had touched a delicate subject, and changed it at once, though for a Scotsman not to know what kith or kin he came of seemed certainly incomprehensible; but Hew, aware of the vast value he attached to the most fortuitous circumstances of birth, family, and position, thought:

'No pedigree! By Jove! our Cameronian will find but small favour here now.'

'Tunley has got some magnificent Marcobruner and Lafitte in the cellar, Falconer,' said Sir Piers; 'I must have your opinion—but if I only look at them, I should have a twinge of my old enemy the gout.'

Falconer bowed his thanks, and was turning again to address Mary, when Sir Piers took his attention by plunging once more into Central India, and a stream of anecdotes about 'what the service and the regiment were in *my* time,' till the ladies withdrew, and, to Hew's disgust, there followed, of course, a professional conversation, on which he was totally unable to enter; thus he could only sip his wine, toy with the grape-scissors, or crack an occasional nut, while hearing Sir Piers laughing at jokes that seemed destitute of all fun to him, and all matters of 'shop' were discussed with the keenest relish—the new head-dress for the Line, the new pattern musket, and endless anecdotes of the mess-room and parade, to all of which Hew, not unnaturally, perhaps, listened with ill-disguised impatience;

and even when the conversation halted irregularly between music and literature, or art and politics, home and foreign, he could not enter thereon, as Hew abhorred all books save a betting one, and read no journal save the *Sporting Times*.

Cecil Falconer rose to rejoin the ladies, but the general was in no mood to spare him, and insisted again and again on one more glass of dry sherry, 'just as a white-washer;' and of course that, 'by the way,' reminded him of 'how we used to be annoyed at Agra by the musk-rats running over the wine-bottles, and communicating a confounded flavour of musk to the sherry, which is no improvement to the wine, I can tell you; and it is a curious fact that every English resident in India tastes musk in his wine at some time or other, though there are some who assert it is a mere superstition. When we were at Agra and elsewhere up country, we had deuced little money among us in the Cameronians, yet somehow we always spent a devil of a lot of it; for every fellow drew a bill on every other fellow, so there was a regular cross-fire of blue paper from right to left.'

To these and other reminiscences Falconer listened with his mind full of the bright smile accorded to him by Mary Montgomerie, when he had adroitly anticipated Hew in opening the door when the ladies departed to the drawing-room, whither he longed to follow them, and from whence the notes of the piano seemed to come as an invitation to do so, but he was compelled to endure anecdotes about India *ad nauseam*.

'By Jove, Sir Piers,' said Hew, wearily, 'I detest India; I have had enough of it!'

'I don't mean you to have any more of it, Hew, and you know that well,' replied Sir Piers kindly, his heart mellowed with wine; 'but you are mistaken in your views of it. "India," says a writer, correctly, I think, "is quite a misrepresented country, and has nothing objectionable in it, but a tiger or two, and a little heat in the warm part of the day."'

The night was considerably advanced when they joined the ladies. Mrs. Garth had already retired; and the jolly old

general, who had partaken of more wine than he usually did, stood in orderly-room fashion, with his feet apart on the rich hearthrug and his back to the fire, winking, blinking, smiling blandly, and not sure whether he was expected to take the field at the head of the Cameronians to-morrow; while at the piano there was performed a little brilliant singing, which Hew, with growing irritation, secretly stigmatised as 'the most duffing caterwauling!' and sat apart sulking (wine had usually this effect upon him), and leaving to Falconer the inevitable and pleasant task of turning the music leaves; and his eyes watched alternately the handsome and well-formed young fellow, who bent with ease and confidence admiringly over the singers, who, with voices sweetly attuned, were performing a duet, and the forms of the latter, so different in the character of their beauty—Mary with her hair of rich dark brown, and Annabelle, the blonde, with her sunny coils, that shone with a remarkable sheen in the flood of radiance that fell from the chandelier.

But the night waned apace, and at last it was necessary to separate, if any justice was to be done to the cover shooting on the morrow, now close at hand.

Hew gave Falconer his hand, which to the latter seemed clammy and quite like the tail of a fish; but the general insisted on escorting him to his 'quarters,' as he said, and conducted him, candle in hand, along one or two stately corridors adorned with fine paintings—two, that were of Cardinal York and King James VIII., evinced the Jacobite proclivities of Sir Piers' ancestors—and there, too, were trophies of the chase, both European and Asiatic. Never had Hew or the girls known the usually grave and rather stately old baronet 'in such a merry pin' (Hew suggested 'so screwed'); but as he threaded the corridors he was heard to sing a scrap of an old Anglo-Indian ditty:

'Good-bye to the *batta!*—to lighten
The pangs of each blooming cadet;
And the brows of the captains to brighten,
They've doubled the one epaulette;

They've added some lace to our jackets,
Augmented the price of our caps,
In the hope that the half-batta rackets
Will merge in the glare of our "traps."
Just as any new plaything bewitches
The sulks out of little boys whipped;
And before they've well pulled up their breeches,
They wholly forget they've been stripped.'

'Ah, yes, Falconer, my lad, that song was known long before your day, when the beggars cut down the *batta*. But here you are—no, here; this is the door. Good-night; hope you'll sleep sound. No need for a chowree to whisk inside the curtains here, as in India, and after making them safe all round the mattress, spring in through the hole you leave (like Harlequin through his hoop), lest a cloud of mosquitoes follow. I remember, at Dumdum—no, at Dinapore, my son Piers and Ballachulish of the Cameronians——' Then his voice broke as he spoke of his son, and he added: 'But I'll tell you about it to-morrow. Breakfast at nine, and then—hey for the covers!'

And now Sir Piers, whose voice had become certainly somewhat 'feathery,' betook him to his own room, pausing on the way more than once, candle in hand, as his aristocratic ideas of family, and that pride of birth which had been his ruling passion and sin in early life, occurred to him, and he muttered, pausing in his progress to bed, and shaking his white head:

'Doesn't know what Falconers he's of—a strange thing—a pity. My boy Piers forgot, too, what Montgomeries *he* was of, once on a time. A fine fellow, though!'

As for the latter, he was simply enchanted with Eaglescraig and all the details thereof: the beauty of the two girls, each so different in its character, and the *savoir vivre* of the old general. As for Hew, he forgot all about him.

Meanwhile, a few rooms distant, the lady's-maid was sleepily combing out the dark and luxuriant tresses of Mary Montgomerie, and the light of a shaded lamp fell softly and tenderly upon the graceful figures of herself and Annabelle, seated in their *robes de chambre* (chatting as young girls will always do

when preparing for rest), on the looped-up lace curtains of their pretty beds, knotted one with blue and the other with rose-coloured ribbons; on the toilet-tables, with their glittering trinkets, and crystal bottles with gold or silver stoppers; on vases of conservatory flowers, and all the pretty luxuries which are usually to be found in the vicinity of youth, wealth, and beauty, as each girl sat smilingly contemplating herself in a long looking-glass, with all her rippling hair floating down over her white shoulders.

'And you like him?' said Mary, after the maid had withdrawn.

'Oh, so much!' exclaimed Annabelle; 'he is quite a dear fellow.'

'He has a gentle voice and gentle eyes, certainly,' said Mary musingly.

'And to me looks somehow like one who has a history beyond that of other young men.'

'A history—what a funny idea! Of course he'll have a history, which, perhaps, like other young subs, he would rather not have made patent to everyone. But you and he seemed to have some little interest in common, Annabelle?'

'Had we?' said the latter, colouring a little.

'He spoke to you often of his friend, the other sub—what is his name?'

'Leslie Fotheringhame,' replied Annabelle in a low voice.

'Do you wish Sir Piers had invited *him*?'

'Perhaps, Mary,' said Annabelle, with a little forced laugh. 'Yet better not, better not,' she thought, with a memory of the days when her hand had thrilled at the touch of Leslie's, even before words of love had been spoken, and there had only been in her ear those broken utterances which a woman seldom, perhaps never, forgets.

So, save in the instance of Hew, all their first impressions of each other were favourable, and the young girls, as each laid her head on her pillow, began already to scheme out pleasant little visions, they scarcely knew of what.

CHAPTER IV.

COVER SHOOTING.

JOVIAL and laughing was the party which assembled at breakfast next day, in the bright morning-room of Eaglescraig, though the December landscape looked bleak enough without.

Mary, in all the freshness of her morning beauty, presided at one end of the loaded table, and Mrs. Garth at the other. Sir Piers was still in his room; but there was Cecil Falconer, in a shooting-suit of the best taste, and having of course innumerable pockets; Hew in rather 'loud'-patterned knickerbockers; a couple of jolly, red-faced country gentlemen, the village doctor, and old Mr. John Balderstone (of whom much more anon), the trusted land agent and local factor of Sir Piers, and deemed one of the best shots in the Bailiwick of Cunninghame, a hale, hearty, ruddy-faced man, with an ample paunch and short sturdy legs encased in long brown gaiters.

'How is Sir Piers this morning, Mr. Hew?' he asked that personage, who was intent on a pile of grouse pie, for the breakfast was a genuine Scottish one, a veritable dinner, with the addition of tea and coffee pots covered with elaborate cosies of Mary's handiwork. 'Well, I hope, and that he goes to shoot with us?'

'Well—I should think so; hearty and lively,' replied Hew, with his mouth full; 'by Jove, he looks as if he was likely to live for ever! He's got the receipt for old Parr's life pills, and the secret of Methuselah too,' was the ungenerous—even coarse—response of Hew, half spoken to himself, and speaking volumes as to his secret thoughts; a response which made worthy old John Balderstone first raise and then knit his shaggy grey eyebrows; 'but here he comes, to answer for himself.'

Laughing and smiling, he greeted all in rapid succession, Cecil Falconer perhaps first of all, and then he kissed Mary;

and anyone who saw how old Sir Piers held her hand and gazed into her tender hazel eyes, might have seen and known that she was the one hope of his now childless old age, and I doubt if he would have dined or breakfasted comfortably without her.

He bowed over the hand of Annabelle Erroll with something of stately, old-fashioned courtesy; he patted Hew on the head as if he had been a boy, and then took a place beside him, after a glance at the weather without, with reference to the shooting. He wore a suit of rough grey tweed, with strong shoes and long brown leather leggings, that had seen service many a time and oft among the beans and turnip-fields all round Eaglescraig; and yet in this—the plainest of all costumes—he looked every inch what he was, a grand-looking and aristocratic old gentleman.

Shooting anecdotes, the qualities of certain dogs, guns, cartridges, new shot-belts, and so forth, were being discussed on all sides, together with eggs, ham, cold pie and steaming coffee, amid all of which Cecil Falconer strove in vain, even by the offer of a chicken-bone, to win the favour of Mary's pet terrier, Snarley, which he was disposed for her sake to view and approach tenderly; but in return her favourite showed a whole set of sharp white teeth, and retreating under his mistress's chair, snarled and repelled the least attempt at familiarity, even when she caught the little brute up in her arms and bestowed upon it kisses, which to Cecil's eye seemed a great waste of something very charming.

'My pet, my own pet!' she called it, Snarley the while eyeing Falconer as if he was his natural enemy or future rival.

'Hope you slept well, Falconer?' said Sir Piers.

'Thanks—like a veritable top,' replied Cecil.

'Right! a regular soldier should be able to sleep anywhere, and never be surprised on awakening in new quarters.'

'Been ever in this part of the world before, sir?' asked Mr. John Balderstone, with his mouth full.

'Never,' replied Cecil.

'Ah, you'll soon learn to like Eaglescraig,' added the factor.

'I am enchanted with it already,' said Cecil, as his eye involuntarily wandered in Mary's direction; 'and believe that I shall like it more and more, till it will be quite a wrench when the time comes to tear myself away.'

'Then come back, Falconer, for some rod-fishing after Candlemas,' suggested his host, with a bright smile.

'Duty, I fear, may clash with your great hospitality; but I thank you, Sir Piers.'

'Call me general; I like it better.'

'To be always called so is my uncle's pet fancy, Mr. Falconer,' said Mary.

'All great men have their weaknesses, and I always respect them,' remarked Hew, with one of his scarcely perceptible sneers, for now Sir Piers, to his irritation, had plunged into some reminiscences of snipe-shooting at Dumdum, where he was wont to be for some hours up to the waist in water under a burning Bengal sun, necessitating frequent libations of brandy-pawnee; then, by some rapid transition of thought, he found himself detailing a march of the Cameronians through the jungles of Arcot, with the rain pouring in torrents, the road knee-deep in mud and mire, the men drenched, the tents soaked through, the mess and baggage animals miles in the rear, the column having to cross a nullah where the water ran like a mill-race, and there was the devil to pay!

Other anecdotes would have followed, but Hew, who had seen enough of India in reality too, proposed a move to the gun-room and thence to the covers.

'Time indeed to be off, gentlemen,' said the general, looking at his watch. 'Tunley, fill those flasks.'

'And have more sandwiches cut,' added Mrs. Garth.

'I shall cut them for Mr. Falconer; he is the only stranger here,' said Mary Montgomerie, hurrying to the sideboard, and proceeding deftly with her pretty hands to do so; while Cecil murmured his thanks, and tendered his silver case or sandwich-box.

'Can't the cook do this?' growled Hew in her ear.

'Yes, but not half so well as I,' replied the girl laughingly. 'I can be so expert when I choose, Hew.'

In the hall, where hung all manner of hats and greatcoats, plaids, whips, salmon-listers, and walking-sticks, Sir Piers assumed an old and well-worn wideawake, the band of which was usually garnished with hooks and flies, for he was as keen a sportsman with his rod and line as with his double-barrelled gun. And now the whole party set forth from the house, Cecil looking more than once to the soft faces of the two smiling girls, who, from the breakfast-room window, watched their departure.

His mind *already* was full of sweet Mary Montgomerie, and he would rather, a thousand times, have remained to sun himself in the light of her winning eyes, than to toil through the damp covers to knock over a few rabbits or a brace of harmless birds; and he could but console himself by counting the hours that must inevitably elapse ere he could meet her again, and strive to endure them as best he might.

Hew detected one of these glances thrown back to 'the face at the window,' and remembering his ramble with Mary in the Dovecot Park, bit his nether lip; and before the day's shooting was over, Falconer had a specimen of what the amiable Hew might be capable of doing if provoked.

Preoccupied thus, Cecil Falconer thought that on this particular morning 'the Land of Burns' seemed uncommonly dreary. Mist was rolling along the valleys, and the landscape looked dank and moist through its medium.

Hew, who, though not ungentlemanlike in bearing, was, as we have said, naturally coarse in mind, and sometimes blunt in manner, the result of association with billiard-markers and stablemen, on seeing Falconer give another glance towards the house, said abruptly, and with what he meant to be a laugh:

'I don't think you can see her now.'

'Her—who?' asked Falconer, with surprise.

'Well, my cousin; for I think you evidently admire her.'

'An odd remark!' thought Cecil, looking a little annoyed; but he said cordially:

'I do indeed admire her; who could fail to do so? But what leads you to infer that I do so more particularly?'

'By Jove! I saw that your eyes were seldom off her; but it is no use, Mr. Falconer,' said Hew, with a pretended genial laugh, 'as she has no eyes in reality—save for one fellow.'

'*What* the deuce can he mean?' thought Falconer, a little annoyed by the speaker's manner, which seemed to indicate advice or warning, or impertinence.

'You are cousins, then?' he merely said coldly.

'Well, of course, in a manner of way—rather remote, you know,' replied Hew, his closely-set eyes looking more shifty than ever, as he scraped a match and lighted a huge cigar; 'but blood is thicker than water, and it goes a long way in Scotch reckonings; and thus she naturally looks to *me* as the future head of the house,' he added complacently, 'as the heir of entail. And Mary is indeed handsome! There was no girl handsomer out last season, or when she was presented—I mean in the quiet and thoroughbred style.'

'What a cad this fellow is!' thought Falconer.

'Ah, you have looked admiringly back at the house,' said Sir Piers, who had another theory on the subject; 'the old tower is the part of it that is most to my taste. The cliff was called Eaglescraig, because ages ago a couple of gigantic eagles built a nest there every summer—a nest of branches and great sticks on the giddy verge of the cliff—and the vicinity of it was always found strewed with the bones of muir-fowl, ptarmigan, rabbits, and even lambs. A poor man who lived near it made quite a subsistence for himself and his family, during a famine consequent on an English invasion, by robbing the eaglets of the food brought by the parents; and one day he found a little fair-skinned and golden-haired child therein, brought no one knew from where, by the male bird, but safe and sound. It grew to be a man of vast strength and stature, and he carried the banner of the Bailiwick at the battle

of Largs—and certainly that field was not fought and won yesterday.'

The day was unquestionably a bleak one. The last few leaves were fluttering down from the bare trees, the branches and twigs of which stood blankly and darkly up against the dull grey sky; elsewhere the red and brown remnant of rustling foliage that still lingered on the oaks and ashes was thinned by every passing breeze; and even the gay cock-pheasant, as he skimmed over the gorse to seek his food in the untilled land, might be heard to croak as he went.

Grim old Sandy Swanshot, the head-keeper, and his staff had already traversed the covers; the muzzled ferrets had been down in the rabbit-burrows, scaring forth the occupants; firm, stealthy, and quick-eyed, they drove them into the gorse or elsewhere, and now the earth had been stopped everywhere, barring all return to their well-known holes, which they would never find again.

The cottage of the keeper, old Sandy, a veteran sportsman, silver-haired and wrinkled, who had often carried the general's game-bag when they were both 'school laddies,' was a busy scene that morning. It was a thatched edifice, garlanded round with dead wild-cats, weasels, foumarts, hawks, and 'other vermin,' which in their decay tainted the winter air, and its occupant was old enough to remember when the system of shooting with muzzle-loaders was very different from what it is to-day; when a cover was beaten with a precision quite military, and when the order 'Halt! reload!' went down the line, every man, be he shooter or beater, had to stop where he was, until the last barrel had been charged anew; and the old man had a supreme contempt for the perilous style of blazing away that had come in with arms of precision and the slaughter of battues.

All the dogs around him seemed to know instinctively that they were about to take the field, and kept up a chorus of mingled whining and barking; and all the beaters were there, somewhat motley in aspect and appearance, but all doffing

their bonnets respectfully, as Sir Piers came up with his 'guns' from the manor-house; and each of the latter underwent, unknown to himself, a critical scrutiny under the keen eyes of these practised fellows—his dress, his gun, his gaiters, his shot-belt, every buckle and strap being duly noticed and commented on.

We may hope that Cecil Falconer's bearing and equipment carried him through this unknown ordeal; but the old keeper, who had an instinctive dislike of Hew Montgomerie, whispered to him as a stranger, though Sandy was, in Scottish parlance a *dour carl:* 'Gie him a wide berth in the cover, sir! Shooting? *he* might as well be ballooning!'

Sandy knew some of Hew's vagaries when at cover, such as shooting down the line of the beaters and his companions, letting fly at a bird whose flight was no higher than a man's head, fingering his trigger, heedless of whether the muzzle was pointed to the sky or the earth, and as careless of his friends as if they were clad in Milan mail; for he was one of those awkward fellows who had not even the simple prudence which Charles Dickens ascribes to the obese Mr. Tracy Tupman, when that personage discovered that his chief object was to fire his gun without danger to his friends, himself, or the dogs.

The covers of Eaglescraig were of considerable extent, and were well preserved and carefully looked after; and though Sir Piers, as he said, thought it very slow work compared with pig-sticking in six-foot-high jungle-grass, or potting a man-eater from a howdah, it was what suited him now, and in less than five minutes he had all his 'guns' in 'order of battle,' marshalled apart in a line of about a hundred and forty yards or so, the beaters being chequered in the gaps between the sportsmen.

Advancing thus, like skirmishers in extended order, on the right side of the line, were masses of whin-bush (or gorse as it is called in England), displaying still here and there a golden flower; and away on the left the cover went deep into the dark recesses of a copse, under the tall red stems of Scottish firs, larch, and ash-trees.

Hew and Cecil were in this quarter, and a little in the rear was the keeper, the latter scanning the whole, as far as he well could, from flank to flank, rebuking from time to time, in his deep, broad Ayrshire Doric, any stupid beater who lagged behind, while the sharp crack of the guns woke the echoes of the dingles, which occasionally seemed to reply to quite an irregular volley.

Among the gorse the chief victims were ground game, but amid the coppice the ruddy golden-hued pheasants were momentarily flurried up, and arrested in their whirring flight by the crack of the fatal breechloader.

Ever and anon, the voice of the keeper was heard, with the prohibitory cry of—

'Ware hen—'ware hen, Master Hew!'

Among much other spoil, Cecil knocked over a fine cock-pheasant, which fell crashing down among the underwood in the agonies of death—a charge of shot in his gold-speckled breast.

'Why the deuce did you shoot my bird, sir?' demanded Hew with uncourteous abruptness of Falconer.

'He thocht, perhaps, ye war gaun to miss it, as ye did the last twa, and the hare,' said the old keeper drily.

'I beg your pardon,' replied Cecil quietly, as he reloaded; 'but that bird was mine.'

'It was *not!*' was the blunt and rude rejoinder.

Falconer coloured and bit his lip; but thought of his courtly old host, and desirous of avoiding a scene, simply said:

'Let us keep further apart, Mr. Montgomerie.'

'As far off as you please,' added Hew ungraciously, and moving further away to his left.

Cecil continued to work his way between the crowded fir and larch stems, which, by receiving many a charge of shot, saved the birds that hovered beyond them, the voice of the keeper crying ever and anon: 'Mark cock!' 'Hare forward!' 'Ware hen.' 'A hare for you, Master Hew—a miss again!' 'Come to heel, Countess—come to heel!' the latter, with the vicious whack of a whip, was directed to one of the pointers.

While Cecil was inwardly laughing at Hew's wild shooting, a charge of shot from the right whizzed past his face and tore away the rim of his hat.

A natural exclamation of rage and alarm escaped him, as he had so narrowly escaped having his sight destroyed or his face disfigured for life, and looking whence the shot came, he saw Hew gently slipping another cartridge into the breech of his gun, under cover of a great Scottish fir with a red gnarled stem.

'I shall thank you, sir, to keep your muzzle up, or quit the ground!' said Falconer angrily.

'It was a devil of a mistake—and I beg your pardon,' replied Hew, giving his cold damp hand to Cecil, who saw—or thought he saw—a quiet twinkle of mingled malice and amusement in the speaker's bilious eye.

'Blundering fool! Could he have meant it? Looks deuced like it—but why?' thought the young officer more angrily, as he pondered over the matter.

'He weel-nigh shot Sir Piers in the same unco fashion, sir,' grumbled the old keeper; while Cecil now changed his ground again, and for actual safety kept closer to Hew than ever.

Four long beats through the covers brought luncheon-time, and while flasks and sandwiches were produced, the slain were counted as they were laid in long rows on the side of a grassy bank, each keeper, as he came up in succession, adding his quota to the general stock, all furred and feathered victims from the covers of Eaglescraig, and so numerous, that the sportsmen thought enough had been done for one day.

'I may deem myself lucky that I was not added to *your* bag to-day, Mr. Montgomerie,' said Cecil, laughing, but not with genuine hilarity.

'What! has Hew been at his old tricks again?' asked Sir Piers, with an air of annoyance.

'E'en sae, sir,' said Sandy, taking a flask from his mouth, 'firing doon the line as before.'

'My gun exploded unexpectedly, sir,' said Hew, with a

sullen look; 'I explained to Mr. Falconer, and he has accepted my apology.'

Something in his manner caused this episode to rankle in the memory of Cecil.

'By Jove, I think the cad *had* intended to pot me, after all!' was his occasional thought, and he never precisely forgot or forgave the suspicion—one too grave in its diabolical spirit of mischief and cruelty to be dismissed lightly; and though he laughed at some jokes made by old Mr. Balderstone on the matter, he really saw nothing to laugh at in it, and was very well pleased when the whole party bent their steps homeward —all the more pleased when he thought of the pleasant society that awaited him.

Falconer began to wonder whether he was actually falling in love already with the beautiful grand-niece of his host. He had never believed much in 'that sort of thing,' at first sight especially; but he was young and impressionable; he possessed a keen imagination, and he already caught himself weaving mental conversations with her—conversations in which tender little speeches came involuntarily, though unuttered, to his lips, and soft smiles hovered on hers, when she seemed to hear them; but when—after changing his muddy shooting-costume for another — he joined the ladies in the drawing-room, remembering the almost rude remarks of Hew Montgomerie, Cecil, in approaching Mary, or conversing with her, had an angry sense of being watched, or observed, by that personage; though a time came when he ceased to think or care on the subject.

And *who* was 'the one fellow' for whom only she had eyes, as Hew had vulgarly phrased it? Most probably Hew meant himself! If so, Cecil thought that she cloaked or concealed her partiality with wonderful discretion.

To avoid interfering with that gentleman's views or wishes, Cecil gave much of his attention to Annabelle Erroll, and even to 'the old soldier,' as Hew called Mrs. Garth; but Mary summoned him to her side to see Snarley put through all his per-

formances, such as leaping over her interlaced hands as through a ring, walking erect round the room for a lump of sugar, tossing another high off his sharp nose at the word of command, to catch it with a snap in its descent, and so forth, all the while he did so eyeing Cecil with undisguised hostility.

And eventually the evening closed in like the preceding one (save that old Sir Piers, worn out with his day's sport, had fallen asleep in an easy-chair, with a handkerchief spread over his face), with music and duet-singing, and pleasant conversation, ere some of the visitors rose to depart.

That there should be so much duet-singing, and Mary's occupation with the stranger, and that the general conversation was of a kind in which he could bear no prominent part, disgusted Hew, who was in a detestable humour; yet he had the policy to conceal it pretty well (though his bilious eye was more bilious than ever) till once he drew near Mary, while Cecil, in another part of the room, was occupied with old Mrs. Garth, who was relating with great unction some memory of the Cameronians in *her* day; and now Hew's ready jealousy became painfully apparent.

'Good heavens, Hew!' said Mary, in a low voice, her dark eyes dilating as she spoke; 'what is this Mr. Balderstone has told us?'

'Can't say, for the life of me; the old pump!'

'That you nearly shot Mr. Falconer to-day in the Fir Wood.'

'Did I? Well, the blundering fellow was out of his proper place, I suppose,' was the sulky rejoinder.

'What a dreadful thing if you had injured him! Hew! you are positively dangerous.'

'My dear Mary, you deem him an Admirable Crichton, I doubt not,' said he smilingly in her ear.

'What do *you* deem him?'

'Slow and deuced ugly.'

'Ugly—oh, come, Hew!' said Mary, laughing very merrily at such undisguised jealousy, which somehow did not flatter her in the least—it was too comical.

'I have no doubt our "old soldier" here deems him a very eligible *parti* for anyone; a subaltern, with two shirts a week and a few dickies, by Jove!' he continued.

'How—how coarse you are!' said Mary, with her silvery laugh again; 'but don't let grand-uncle hear you sneering thus. He, too, was a subaltern once.'

'Yes, but with the rent-roll of Eaglescraig! I wish him well out of our neighbourhood, anyway,' he added threateningly.

'Why, what harm has he done you?'

'None as yet,' replied Hew, getting more sulky than ever; 'but I may harm him!'

'How?'

'If he comes in my way with you, Mary, or anyone else—understand that clearly, cousin.'

Mary's brow darkened, and a haughty expression, not unmixed with alarm, stole into her hazel eyes and soft face, as she said, while quickly using her fan:

'Hew, you forget yourself, and me too! How dare you adopt this tone?'

'Don't think to make a fool of me, Mary.'

'Impossible, sir!'

'You think so?'

'Yes. Nature has been before me,' she replied, as she rose and swept across the room to the side of old Mr. Balderstone.

The eyes of Hew, like those of Uriah Heep, 'seemed to take any shade of colour that could make eyes ugly,' as they followed her beautiful figure, and a savage emotion gathered in his avaricious heart as he felt that the chances of his wooing with success—a wooing that was without pure love—were receding further away than ever; but whatever were his thoughts, to show that there was no bad feeling between Cecil Falconer and himself, after all had retired to rest that night, he invited the former to have a quiet little game of écarté in the smoking-room—a game from which the Cameronian did *not*, somehow, come away a winner.

CHAPTER V.

HEW MAKES A VOW.

FOR the next few days Cecil Falconer continued to give Hew a 'gey wide berth,' as the old keeper phrased it, at the covers, where each day's shooting was precisely like that which preceded it. If Hew, thought Falconer, were capable of such mad jealousy and dastardly cruelty after a few hours' acquaintance, of what might he not be capable and guilty in the time to come!

Was it his blundering stupidity which, as the gamekeeper said, had nearly cost Sir Piers his life once before, or a spirit of infernal malevolence to revenge the petty dispute about the cock-pheasant, that made him fire his gun in the way he had done?

At times Cecil was inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, and as he was not of a resentful temperament, he gradually either forgot the event, or remembered it only as a mistake, that might have proved more serious than it did. So each day's shooting passed pleasantly over, and the evenings were devoted to music in the drawing-room, where Mrs. Garth dispensed tea at a pretty little oval table—fragrant orange Pekoe, out of tiny eggshell cups, without handles—and where Sir Piers fell fast asleep over his *Scotsman*; and the night wound up by Hew luring Falconer into what he termed 'a little mild play' in the smoking-room—play from which the latter always rose a loser, without being able precisely to know how.

Save for this kind of thing, which he could ill afford, Falconer thought the brief term of his leave would be delightfully spent at Eaglescraig. A 'green yule' had come and gone, without skating or curling, and the owl whooped nightly on the old tower-head, where the winter wind shook the masses of ivy on the time-worn walls; and the New Year was ushered in with well-bred joviality, rather than the hearty old-fashioned up-

roariousness of the olden time, though in the drawing-room the chorus could be heard from the servants' hall, where Mr. Tunley led it with joyous vociferation, singing,

'Here's a health to the year that's awa' !'

And precisely as the house-clocks struck twelve—midnight—the house-door was unbarred with great formality, and thrown open to let the Old Year *out*, and the New Year *in ;* and rising from his elbow-chair, Sir Piers kissed his niece Mary, and then old Mrs. Garth in a courtly fashion, an example Hew Montgomerie was not slow to follow on the soft cheek of the former, while Falconer looked laughingly, yet perhaps enviously, on, and dared only press her hand, as he did that of Miss Erroll ; and then there was a general hand-shaking with Mr. Balderstone and other old friends who had been invited to join the social circle.

The rubicund Mr. Tunley offered, in the name of all the servants, to drink their old master's good health, and the health of all the family ; and Sir Piers, natheless all his pride, cordially shook the old butler's hand, and each wished the other many happy years to come ; and he went through the same ceremony with all in the servants' hall.

In all this homely warmth, mutual kindness and goodwill, there was much that charmed Falconer ; for though belonging to a Scottish regiment, and one famous in history, educated as he had been far away from his native country, and under peculiar circumstances, he knew little or nothing of the ways and customs of the latter.

He had been much a wanderer, and never knew a home, save such as he had found with his regiment ; so there was much in the little circle at Eaglescraig to delight him. Save with Hew, he won golden opinions from all there ; his genial manner, spirited good-humour, handsome bearing, and facile mode of adapting himself to those among whom chance threw him—a mode that came, perhaps, of his having been educated abroad—all seemed to make him a prime favourite.

He could speak much, and pleasantly, of what he had seen and where he had been; he was a reader, too, and the fruit of his reading cropped up pleasantly from time to time in the course of conversations that Hew could take little or no part in, greatly to his own wrath.

'What a place this is for gammon and spinach!' thought Hew, who viewed all this with extreme distaste, and still more the intimacy that progressed between this 'interloper,' as he deemed him, and Mary Montgomerie; for they nightly played together the mazurkas of Chopin and selections from the songs of Mendelssohn and the operas of Verdi, while Hew looked darkly and dubiously on, thinking there was in all this far more than met the eye; and Sir Piers thought, with a smile, that a Cameronian of *his* time would certainly not have shone much as a pianist.

Mary was always so happy in herself, that she usually made all others equally so; thus, in her society, the hours, with Falconer, seemed to fly like minutes.

Hew had—unknown to Sir Piers—become so seriously involved in monetary matters during his sojourn in India, that it was next to impossible for him to return there; and his chief hope for retrieving himself and doing well for the future lay in a marriage with Mary Montgomerie, rather than the prospective succession to the baronetcy and to the acres of Eaglescraig, for Sir Piers was a hale old fellow and might live for twenty years yet. Indeed, everyone said so.

Thus he viewed with extreme bitterness and jealousy the visit of Falconer and some of the details attendant on that visit, and his closely-set and parti-coloured eyes twinkled dangerously as he muttered:

'Devil take me if I don't bowl that fellow out yet!'

If Hew had been tender and true, less brusque and coarse—had really loved Mary with a loving heart—she might have felt some compunction for her laughing indifference to his suit; but she knew well his avarice, his monetary hopes, and suspected some of his vices; and, more than all, her proud spirit revolted

at the idea of being made by her father's will the mere puppet of a family compact, and *compelled* to marry any man.

'I heard you arranging a riding-party to-morrow, Mary,' said he, during a pause (or while Falconer was being accompanied in an Italian song by Miss Erroll), and bending over Mary till his moustache nearly touched the white and close division in her rich dark-brown hair, while she idled over an album of Indian photographs.

'Yes—you will go, of course, Hew?' said she, looking up at him with her sunny hazel eyes bright with a smile.

'I would rather be excused,' he replied sulkily.

'Why?'

'Why? because I should be only in the way.'

'Please yourself, Hew; but I do not understand you,' said Mary, colouring with annoyance; '*what* do you mean?'

'I mean,' said he bluntly, and in a low concentrated voice, 'that before this Cameronian fellow came you and I were—were——'

'Were what?' asked Mary sharply.

'Well, friends, at least.'

'And are we not friends now?' she said, laying her hand on his arm. He looked lingeringly at it—a lovely hand it was, round and white, with a golden bangle clasping the dimpled wrist—and he said in a low voice:

'I had hoped we should in time be something dearer——'

'Oh, stuff! Dear Hew, don't begin that sort of thing here,' replied Mary, laughing to conceal her annoyance; 'you will forget all about it when you go back to India again.'

Hew's face darkened ominously.

'But you don't like India?' added Mary, somewhat teasingly, while a roguish smile dimpled her cheeks.

'I hate it, as you know well; yet I may have to return there, for all that you care about it, or me.'

'There are tigers there, and snakes, and all those sort of things, Hew?'

'Yes, and perhaps you would like them to eat me?' he asked viciously.

'Oh, Hew! how can you speak thus?' she exclaimed, laughing. 'I never said so.'

'But you thought it, all the same.'

She laughed louder at this, for Hew's peculiar love-making, if it annoyed, always excessively amused her at the same time —a fatal element for him.

The morning of the proposed ride proved a beautiful one, clear, bracing, and sunny, and the horses were betimes brought round from the stables to the stately perron in front of the house, where Hew was smoking a cigar, when the girls came forth in their riding-habits attended by Cecil Falconer.

'And you are resolved not to accompany us, Hew?' asked Mary coaxingly, desirous to please him.

'Yes,' he replied bluntly.

'What a pity the season is not summer,' she said to Falconer, 'we could have such pleasant sketching expeditions, picnics, afternoon tea on the lawn, croquet-matches, and lawn-tennis; but our picnics are so jolly, and we always use the big omnibus in which the servants drive on Sundays to the kirk of Eaglescraig.'

'Croquet is only good for one thing,' muttered Hew; 'it enables a fellow to loaf with some girl he is soft upon; otherwise I never could see anything in it,' he added, in his growling tone.

Slender and willowy looked the figure of Mary in her tight, well-fitted habit, even more so than that of Miss Erroll, who was undoubtedly a very handsome girl.

Hew, having been in India, had been compelled to learn riding; but he was a timid and indifferent cavalier, afraid of a horse, indeed, and he could never have done what he saw Mary doing, tickling, patting, and kissing the nose of her favourite pad, ere she was swung into her saddle so deftly by Cecil, to whose care and companionship, together with those of Annabelle Erroll, he was now compelled to relinquish her, as the three departed, merrily and laughingly, to visit the ruined castle of Kilbirnie, amid its stately parks and beautiful gardens.

Down the long avenue they went, under oaks and elms that had been growing since the field of Pinkecleugh was fought

and lost; and between a pair of grand old carved iron gates, surmounted by a coat-of-arms and supported by massive stone pillars covered with grey lichen and green moss, and past the lodge, the occupant of which, an old wooden-legged Cameronian, stood at 'attention' as they issued out upon the roadway, watched by the evil eyes of Hew, to begin a two hours' 'spin' through a rich and pastoral country.

Conversation of the stereotyped kind, concerning the weather and so forth, had been long ignored by Falconer and Miss Montgomerie.

'I shall show you some beautiful scenery,' said she, as they shortened their horses' pace to a walk; 'it is of the pastoral kind, of course—for this is the land of dairy-farms and Dunlop cheeses—all hill and dale; and though there are no mountains, we are very proud of Cunninghame,' she added, laughing. 'Do you draw?'

'Yes.'

'And paint?'

'A little, in water-colours.'

'What a pity it is winter-time! Were the season open, we might sketch together, and how delightful that would be!'

Cecil Falconer cordially agreed with her.

'You must know that I love all this place dearly, wood, wold, and water,' exclaimed the girl, with a bright smile, as she looked around her with eyes the greatest beauty of which was their happy expression, girlish truthfulness, and the innocence of a nature that had never sought either to stimulate or conceal an emotion; 'but I fear you will deem me very provincial.'

'Why—for loving your native place?'

'Ah! but this is *not* my native place. I was born far away from here; but since poor papa followed mamma to her grave, I have lived at Eaglescraig, and all the happiest memories of my childhood, and girlhood, too, are connected with it; so I love the bold rocky scenery, the great bluffs that overhang the Firth of Clyde, and the green pastoral valleys of Cunninghame.

I know every farm and cottage, every coppice and whimpling burn, in the bailiwick.'

'Is it long since your parents died, Miss Montgomerie?' asked Falconer, as their conversation began to take a personal turn.

'Yes; oh, so long ago that I can only remember them as if in a dream!'

'That is sad.'

'And yours—was your father in the Cameronians?'

'He died when I was in infancy; and where I scarcely know.'

'But he, too, was a soldier, of course?'

'I think not,' said Falconer evasively.

'I am too curious—pardon me; but I am a terrible talker,' she added, and changed the subject, which Annabelle Erroll perceived had brought an unwonted colour to the young man's cheeks.

Falconer had often thought that, had his father lived, there would have been a great difference in his own life somehow, though he could not distinctly define the nature of it.

'How I wish your friend had been here with you,' Mary Montgomerie said, after a pause.

'Leslie Fotheringhame?'

'Yes; but Sir Piers said it was impossible.'

'He, too, could not leave our detachment.'

'How lonely he must be, shut up in that dull castle of Dumbarton. His name is a scarce one; is he one of the old Fotheringhames of Angus?'

'I believe so,' said Miss Erroll, colouring after she spoke.

'We should have made quite a pleasant quartette!' said Miss Montgomerie. 'Does he sing?'

'Oh yes—so well!' replied Annabelle, ere Falconer could speak.

'How do *you* know?' asked her friend, laughing.

Annabelle, usually taciturn and silent, now changed colour more perceptibly, and replied:

'Surely Mr. Falconer must have said so! How should *I* know, otherwise?'

Cecil was perfectly aware that he had never done so, but was puzzled to think how Miss Erroll was aware of his friend's talent.

'You have met, perhaps?' he began.

'In society—yes; people meet each other everywhere nowadays,' she replied, and looked another way.

The three riders were still in view of the loftily situated house and tall old tower of Eaglescraig, and Hew's eyes, from the terrace, were following them.

He seemed still to see the skill and grace with which—as if he caressed her—Cecil Falconer had swung Mary Montgomerie into her saddle, and the care and tenderness with which he adjusted her stirrup, her habit, and reins. He seemed to see, too, the light in the eyes of both as they scampered down the long avenue, ere he turned away to get a foaming beaker of soda-and-brandy, in Mr. Tunley's pantry, as a panacea for his bitter thoughts.

He watched the trio disappear over a slope, or braehead, where the road dipped downward, and he registered a vow of vengeance on Cecil Falconer *if* the latter crossed his purposes —a vow all the deeper for being unspoken—and he achieved it terribly when the time came, and it was ultimately to assume a form and force beyond even what he himself could have conceived!

Nature had cursed Hew with a suspicious and jealous disposition; inherent doubt of everyone was a part of that very disposition. Thus, his own total want of success with Mary Montgomerie, on one hand, led him, on the other, to conceive the most exaggerated ideas of the progress Cecil Falconer must already have made with her.

Hew Montgomerie, when he chose, could be 'a good hater,' and, as such, would have been decidedly after the heart of the 'great' English lexicographer, whose hateful addendum was, 'I never forgive an injury;' but Cecil had in no way injured Hew.

CHAPTER VI.

A REVELATION.

Of Cecil Falconer's mood of mind and views of the whole situation at this time, we can be best informed by a letter which he despatched to his friend and chum, Leslie Fotheringhame, on the day subsequent to the little riding expedition :

'Eaglescraig, Cunninghame.

'My dear Leslie,

'Hannibal has found his Capua ! After our limited *cuisine* at Dumbarton, it seems to me that—so far as luxury is concerned—daily Lucullus dines with Apicius ; by which preamble you will think, old fellow, that I have gone out of my mind, or betaken me to cramming again, as we did at Sandhurst. I am freely quartered in a magnificent house, with delightful society, and an old host, the general, who is hospitality's own self, and possesses a well-filled stable and a rare cellar—not that I care for it much—but any way, in its binns are some curious old Madeira that has been thrice round the Cape, white and red Constantia, Tokay with tints of gold, Chateau-Yquem, and Malmsey in which maudlin Clarence might have been drowned.

'We have had some excellent cover shooting, and, though the birds were a little wild, a good many brace fell to my bag. Nothing is stiff or formal here, though the old gentleman has some stately, eccentric, and rather extravagant notions about family, pedigree, blood, and all that sort of thing, and laments much the loss of a son who was once one of "Ours." There are two charming girls here, and after one's bachelor and barrack experiences it is delightful to meet them each day at breakfast, with their fresh morning costumes and complexions; and charm-

ing, too, is the morning-room—quite like that described in "Coningsby": "Such a profusion of flowers; such a multitude of books; such a prodigality of writing materials; so many easy-chairs too, of so many shapes, each in itself a comfortable home; yet nothing crowded." And then the girls! Don't you envy me, old fellow? But I have no doubt they will have you over here when I—alas!—leave, for the old double Dun in the Clyde.

'There is one blot in my picture—a member of the family circle, named Hew Caddish Montgomerie, to whom I am obliged to do the civil, the general's heir—whom I simply detest and view in the light of a noxious reptile, why or how I cannot precisely say; but we have our likings and dislikings in this world, our attractions and repulsions, and *certes* this fellow repels me!

'He is jowly in face, with full, red lips, heavy, stealthy, and shifty eyes, set close to his nose, and he inherits rather reddish hair and freckles from the family who gave him his middle name, which, curiously enough, is Caddish; and in spite, jealousy, or by a blunder, he nearly potted me one day in the covers!

'I think he already views me as a species of rival; he is a sort of cousin of Miss Montgomerie (would that I were so! but I am only one of those poor devils who exist in the world on sufferance), and whether they are engaged or not I cannot tell. He has half led me to infer as much, and assumes a disgusting air of proprietary and so forth, which certainly is not endorsed by Miss Montgomerie.'

(Falconer had written 'by *Mary*,' but had dashed through the Christian name, which had escaped his pen, and Fotheringhame remarked this.)

'Anyhow, I was cognisant of a rather tender scene between them in the avenue on the day I arrived here. He is deuced sharp at cards, and I have already lost to him much more than I can afford to lose.

'The general is an enthusiast on all that pertains to the regiment, and quite a detachment of it, in the shape of pensioners,

is quartered on his property. His Indian anecdotes *are* a little prosy, as he lugs them in on every conceivable occasion; but he is such a dear old fellow, that one can't help listening to his yarns about curry and rice; and a curious one he told me, last night, may interest you, as it referred to his son and a detachment of "Ours."

'When they were in Central India, Piers Montgomerie, with forty Cameronians and some natives, invested a fort named the Ghurry of Kittoor, a square edifice with towers at the corners, armed with heavy gingals and a few small cannon. The Potail commanding it was a resolute fellow, believing himself shot-proof, by an amulet he wore, and he was custodian of a great amount of treasure in gold mohurs, of which Piers had orders to deprive him. The fort was stormed, the Potail slain, and the treasure-chest was found, but totally empty—verifying the last words of the Potail, who, when dying, swore upon the Koran that there was not even an anna in the place, and that all the slaughter had been for nothing.

'Before the gate of the Ghurry there grew a tree of vast size and age, which Captain Montgomerie ordered his men to cut down for fuel. The soldier who hewed down the first branch brought away with it a literal shower of gold—gold that flashed in the sunshine and studded all the green sward like yellow buttercups; and there, sure enough, in the hollow trunk of the tree, was found treasure to the value of fifty thousand golden mohurs, to the bewilderment and joy of the Cameronians, who had been on such short rations for some time past, that they were ready to share the repast of Count Ugolino.

'I listen patiently to such yarns, because I am anxious to remain in his good graces; would that I could also be in those of his ward and niece!

'I believe, Leslie, that you are nearer to my heart than any other friend I ever had, so I don't mind owning to you that I am in for it—about to fall in love! I have always been at the same old game, you will say; but this time I fear that I am in terrible earnest, and have met my fate! But the deuce is, that

she is a great heiress, while I have only my pay, or little more, and dare not lift my eyes so high; besides, what would be the use, as I strongly suspect that, with the general's wish and consent, she is the *fiancée* of his heir—the most unamiable, yet enviable, Cousin Hew!

'She is more than handsome—she is downright beautiful! Somewhat of a brunette, only a very pale and colourless one, with a small straight nose, dark hazel eyes, and dark brown hair, and her mouth is the sweetest in expression I ever saw; but I think I see you laughing at all this, you unbelieving villain!

'Even now, as I write in the library, she makes a delicious picture, with her beautiful slender throat and shapely head, as she stands in an oriel, whispering to a canary which flutters its golden wings against the bars of its cage, and takes from *her* rosy lips a crumb of sugar in its bill.

'She is frank and open-hearted, and somehow seems to sympathise with all my thoughts and fancies, and we have already gone some length in a mixture of confidential jest and earnest, which, though it may only amuse her, is perilous work to me. She is, perhaps, a little proud of her beauty; but what pretty girl is not? She seems a creature that draws brightness from all around her, while dispensing it in return, and to have been made only to be petted, admired, and caressed.

'You will think that I am hit hard. Well, old fellow, I grant to you that I *am*, and already a remoteness seems to have come over my past—our old barrack-room life at Dumbarton and elsewhere.

'To be hourly in the society of such a girl—to have her daily to walk, to ride, to sing with—is sure to have but one end. Her voice, by the way, is a clear and thrilling soprano—her touch upon the keys is full of tenderness; but a distrust of myself besets me sorely, and leaves unspoken the words that—despite the existence of Cousin Hew—hover on my lips.

'Why? you will ask.

'Because it is difficult for a man that is poor, and has not

even high family to recommend him, to be deemed other than a fortune-hunter, when he aspires to an undoubted heiress; but I shall tell you all about this when I rejoin, and Fate has dropped its pall between her and me.

'I have lost at écarté to Hew Montgomerie, and have given him my I.O.U. for a hundred and eighty pounds. Please lend me the money, like a dear old fellow, and I shall square it up somehow, ere we go back to head-quarters, as we are sure to do when the spring drills commence, as I loathe to be in this fellow's debt, and the sum is rather a crusher to me.

'I hope all is right with our detachment, and that you grant no passes for more than twenty-four hours, and look sharp after our fellows. I must close now, as we are about to have a spin through the country, as far as Kilwinning, to see the company of archers practise, for old Sir Piers has more than once been captain of the popinjay in June, and a winner of the silver arrow.'

He had closed and despatched his letter ere he remembered that he had omitted all mention, even by name, of Annabelle Erroll.

CHAPTER VII.

HEW'S 'MILD PLAY.'

FOTHERINGHAME wrote promptly back to Falconer; his letter contained the 'needful,' and some bantering advice with reference to his love affair.

'For a man in full possession of his senses,' he wrote, 'you are evidently far gone indeed; and if matrimony alone will cure you, and cause thereby the loss of a thorough good fellow to the corps and the service, why the deuce don't you propose, and turn the flank of the cub named Hew, of whose "mild play" I would advise you to beware, especially as écarté is a

very rooking kind of game. Cut in for the girl, if you are determined to chuck yourself away; and, if you play your cards in love as well as the cousin does at écarté, she will soon be nestling her blushing cheek on your waistcoat, and scratching her dainty nose on your diamond studs.'

'How *can* he write thus of such a creature as Mary Montgomerie!' muttered Falconer indignantly.

'If she has wealth, it is all the better, as you have none,' continued the epistle. 'And as far as name is required, a Falconer is just as good as a Montgomerie, I suppose.'

'I am doubtful if Sir Piers shares this opinion,' thought Falconer; but, for the future, he resolved to write no more to Fotheringhame on the subject now growing daily nearer his heart.

'When I put on my first red coat,' continued Fotheringhame, 'I resolved, if I married at all, to condescend to nothing less than a young dowager duchess, a peeress in her own right, or an heiress, beautiful as a houri; but none of these have, as yet, come in my way.'

Falconer lost no time in paying Hew, who gave back the I.O.U., and invited him to have his revenge in a little 'mild play' that night in his own room; and the former promised to take it if he could, resolving the while to keep a sharp watch upon his adversary's play.

Falconer had not been without a hint concerning it from Mrs. Garth, who took a motherly interest in him, as a young officer—more than all, as one of her '*own* Cameronians,' as she was wont to call the corps.

'You and Hew sit up very late at night, I fear,' she remarked incidentally; 'smoking, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'Any play?'

'A little.'

'Take care,' she resumed softly; 'those who play with Hew often lose and seldom win. He is such a—such a very good player; and young men, I know, are so foolish at times.'

Had she hinted aught of this to the general?

Falconer was almost inclined to think so, as before Fotheringhame's inclosure came, his somewhat disturbed and preoccupied air was noted by his host, who, drawing him aside, said kindly:

'Look here, Falconer, you seem rather distrait this morning. I was once a sub myself, and not always a jolly one; are you in want of ammunition? If so, say the word and my purse is at your service to any amount; and as for repayment, take your time; "it may be for years, and it may be for ever," so far as I care, when obliging a brother officer of my own corps.'

Thanking the kind old man from his heart, Falconer waived the subject; and ere the small hours of the night came, he found himself in Hew Montgomerie's room, seated at a table on which were several packs of new cards.

The guest of Sir Piers, and the secret admirer of Mary, poor Falconer felt himself constrained to be victimised nightly in his desire to 'stand well,' as the phrase is, even with Hew: thus he veiled his growing suspicions and dislike of the latter, who, when quite sober, for his own purpose, and to win as much as he could from the luckless sub—a fact and system that would have roused the wrath of Sir Piers—also veiled, so far as he could, *his* dislike and jealousy of Cecil; and thus held over, *pro tem.*, his intended vengeance, if his path or purpose were crossed, though he never forgot the wicked oath by which he had bound himself.

To lose again, as he had lost before, Falconer knew might prove his ruin now; but he resolved to be wary, and to watch well, and though Hew was a player accustomed to deep and sharp play for years, in whiling away the lonely hours in an Indian bungalow far up-country, he was destined to have his *modus operandi* thoroughly laid bare on this occasion.

Personally, Hugh was disposed to be offensive to Falconer; but dissembled, as he was anxious to 'rook' him a little further, and also to mislead him with reference to his own views concerning Sir Piers' ward. Cunning hints did much to achieve

this with Cecil, and to curb and perplex the latter, who never forgot the scene in the avenue on the day of his arrival.

Hew began by pressing Falconer to partake of a tall and foaming glass of brandy and soda, of which Tunley had left a supply for them on a side-table, together with a box of havanas.

Hew's room was hung with coloured prints of the hunting field, the paddock, and other horsey subjects, for though no horseman, as we have said, he made up his book upon coming events and betted freely, while his knowledge of whist and écarté was only excelled by that which he possessed of zoology, so far as referred to rats and badgers. But he loved to affect a 'horsey' style; thus his mantelpiece was littered by spurs, whips, riding-gloves, and rusty bits, and pipes, long, short, clay, and briar-root; and in one corner stood a row of boots, the leather tops of which obtained 'their creamy tint,' as he said, 'from being rubbed with champagne and apricot juice—a hint given him by a gentleman-jock of the Royal Hussars.'

'As usual?' said Hew; écarté, I suppose?'

'Yes,' replied Falconer, as they lit their cigars; 'écarté be it.'

'By Jove! one would require four eyes to play that game.'

Falconer thought that in the present instance eight might be advantageous.

'Five points, and two packs to facilitate the deal,' said Hew, as he quickly shuffled the cards; Falconer cut them, and the play began.

Falconer affected what he did not feel—but very far from it—an unusually free, easy, and careless manner, looked at the hunting pictures hung round the room, chattered on indifferent subjects, to lull the suspicions of Hew, and intent on verifying his own, in which he found a very unexpected assistant in the form of Mary Montgomerie's pet terrier Snarley, which had already become reconciled to him—had taken even a capricious fancy for him (for which it had been privately kicked more

than once by the amiable Hew); and now it lay coiled up at his feet, and it was while stooping from time to time to pat the dog, that he perceived the latter come from under the table with a card in his teeth.

All this while, Hew had been deeply intent on the points and counters. He had, however, allowed Falconer, as a lure, no doubt, to win four games successively, and as many sovereigns, when he suddenly proposed to increase the stakes to five pounds.

'Agreed,' said Falconer, almost to the other's surprise, he did it so readily; and the play went briskly on, while he continued to chat on irrelevant subjects.

'Who was that good-looking young fellow who took Miss Montgomerie in to dinner this evening?' he asked.

'Good-looking? *I* don't think so, but tastes differ. As to who he is, I may say that he comes of a good old county stock —nay, is *the* stock himself—Bickerton of that ilk. You don't set much store on that sort of thing, as I remember,' added Hew, who could never resist saying a disagreeable thing, 'as you didn't seem to care what Falconer you came of, when Sir Piers—a great man for pedigree—spoke about it.'

Cecil Falconer coloured perceptibly at this remark. Hew saw that it *was* a sore subject, and thought to himself:

'Hit him on the raw there, somehow!'

Meanwhile, Falconer looked curiously at him from time to time. Was it the growing regard for Mary Montgomerie that induced him, Cecil Falconer, to dissemble in his bearing towards this fellow, and affect to forget that, but for a chance next to a miracle, by his hands, on that day at the covers, he might now have been a mutilated, hideous, and blind creature—blighted in existence and profession for ever?

Yes, the influence of Mary alone could make him act the double part he felt himself to be acting now.

Hew was dealing, and while Falconer was stooping to pat Snarley, gave himself—as he had done before—eight cards instead of *five*, some of which he seemed to drop as if by a

blunder, and in mistake only took up one, leaving the remainder on the carpet till the hand was played out, when he skilfully, but not unnoticed, contrived to replace them in the pack.

'When we are married,' said he, with a nervous chuckle, 'I'll have to drop all this sort of thing, I suppose.'

'Well, don't *drop* your cards as yet,' replied Falconer coldly. 'Married—you, and who?'

'Mary and I; it's all arranged, don't you know? Oh, by Jove, here is luck!' he added, looking for a king, and of course *getting* one, while the score was growing heavy against his adversary, and was close on a hundred now.

'Hallo, Mr. Montgomerie!' exclaimed Falconer angrily, as Hew stooped to fish for a dropped card, 'what's the matter?'

'I have dropped a card, by Jove! and that d——d terrier has collared it. Here, Snarley, you brute!'

'You have dropped half-a-dozen, sir!' said Falconer sternly, as he rose from his chair with menace in his eyes.

'I have not!'

'Look for yourself, then.'

'Where?'

'Under the table.'

'By Jove, there *are* cards there!' said Hew, with well-simulated surprise, as he hastily picked them up; 'but they were never dropped by me.'

'By whom, then?'

To gain time, or avoid reply, Hew addressed himself to his brandy and soda, of which he had imbibed more than enough already.

'Never again shall I play with you' ('you scoundrel,' Cecil was on the point of adding); 'and if I do not expose your play to Sir Piers and the public, it is only because I have a sincere respect for your family. This is my score,' he continued, taking up a memorandum, 'more than one hundred pounds, which I must have paid you, but for this most fortunate discovery, which cancels everything!'

With these words, Falconer tore up the paper and scattered the fragments, while Hew, unsteady in his movements now, clutched the back of his chair with both hands, grew very pale in the face, and literally glared at him with his shifty green eyes.

'You are mistaken, Mr. Falconer,' he said thickly.

'I am *not* mistaken, sir!'

'Come, come; don't make a d——d row about nothing,' said Hew coarsely and bluntly; but as he had no wish, as yet, to push matters to an extremity with Falconer, or drive him to report the occurrence to Sir Piers, he alternately sought to explain, temporise with, and even to bully him, seeking at the same time to retain him in the room for a little space, and unwired another bottle for his benefit; and Cecil at first thought he was *acting* intoxication as a cover, or excuse, for his recent trickery.

'We mustn't appear to quarrel, you know,' said he inarticulately, while glaring viciously at Falconer. 'Won't do—bad style of thing—bad form. Keep it dark with Sir Piers,' he added, swaying about as if his heels were on a pivot; 'a bloated old aristocrat—man likely to hop his twig! Ah! you thought to draw me like a badger about Mary, but won't be drawn by you or any man.'

'Good-night!' cried Cecil, making his escape.

'Goor-right—goor-right!' said Hew, lunging right and left, and nearly knocking over the card-table, while sending after his guest a savage malediction, with an unlit havana in his mouth.

Thus, at first, through the appearance of Mary's terrier Snarley with a card in his mouth, Falconer had obtained an insight into the cause of his own continued losses, and the steady success of Hew Montgomerie, with whom, of course, he could never play again; and the knowledge of this, together with the disgrace of being unmasked as a gambler and cheat, added to the growing hatred that possessed the other, who did not appear next morning at breakfast, but left a message with Tunley for Sir Piers, to the effect that he had gone to fulfil an engagement for a few days' shooting at Bickerton's place, in the

adjacent bailiwick of Kyle, and there, doubtless, he would plot mischief for the time to come.

'A jolly good riddance!' thought Falconer, as he recalled with disgust the episode of the last night.

CHAPTER VIII.

'THE LOVE THAT TOOK AN EARLY ROOT.'

SEVERAL days had passed now since Cecil Falconer found himself fairly installed as a guest at Eaglescraig.

Hew was still absent, and Falconer thought it strange, if he and Mary were engaged, or lovers in fact, as many a casual remark from Hew had led him to infer, to the great repression of his own secret hopes, that the handsome Russia leather despatch-box, which was stamped with the three *fleurs-de-lis*, and the three annulets of Montgomerie, and which, with the regularity of clockwork, was brought in at breakfast-time by Mr. Tunley, never contained an epistle from him to her.

Cecil naturally supposed that lovers wrote each other daily; but here was a pair who never wrote to each other at all! Cecil gathered a little hope and confidence from the circumstance, till a tormenting doubt suggested that they might have had a lovers' temporary quarrel.

The days passed, we say, and in all that time, while almost hourly enjoying the society of Mary Montgomerie, Falconer had in no way betrayed the growing emotions of his heart; and though markedly attentive, there was nothing approaching lover-hood in his conduct or bearing; but it would have been very difficult to convince the absent and vindictive Hew of that fact, as it was a fixed conviction of his, that there was more in everything in this world than met the eye, and that all still waters run deep.

Cecil's face brightened, and his tone softened more, when

addressing Mary Montgomerie than they did when he was with Miss Erroll, or other ladies. There were no other signs; but her keener perception and more subtle instinct told her intuitively that he felt a deeper interest in her than he had yet avowed; and, though she had many admirers, the consciousness of this made her heart beat happily, and gave a little coquetry to her manner, that, when other men were present, scarcely pleased Falconer, who thought that perhaps she was only *amusing* herself with him in the absence of her ungracious *fiancé*.

She was quite a sister of charity, Mary Montgomerie, in that part of the country, and sometimes Cecil drove her pony-carriage on her missions—a tiny basket carriage, full of gifts for the poor, all of which were bestowed upon them in a friendly rather than a charitable way by the softly-eyed chatelaine of Eaglescraig, who loved to cultivate thus a link, a bond, between the cottage and the great house; and Falconer, no doubt to please her, never forgot the various relationships and names of the recipients of her bounty, and contrived to have always for each man or woman a packet of that peculiar tobacco which they specially affected; thus he too became a favourite with them all. He never forgot the joy of these little drives, in the deep old lanes of Cunninghame, with such a companion as Mary Montgomerie, nestled together in the tiny pony-carriage, covered by the ample skin of a dreadful man-eater, whom the general's gun had brought down in the swampy Terrai of Nepaul, and the inevitable Snarley coiled up at her pretty feet; drives in the clear, frosty winter afternoons, when the skies were blue and bright, or flecked by golden cloud, when the distant hills were capped with snow, and the smoke of the steamers in the Firth of Clyde towered straight upward till lost in the pure and ambient air.

Already they felt quite like old friends, these two; they had a thousand topics and views in common, and they became perfectly unconstrained, familiar, and easy with each other—familiar with a rapidity that surprised themselves.

Little by little Mary wound her way quickly round the heart of Cecil Falconer; but dread of her relations with Hew Mont-

gomerie tied up the tongue of the former more than even the crushing knowledge of his own meagre exchequer did.

She soon discovered that sentiment which every young officer possesses—a pride in his regiment, and drew him out to talk enthusiastically of its achievements and ancient history, and watched with pleasure his animated face while he expatiated on a topic so congenial; though to her, in reality, the glories of Her Majesty's Cameronians had been rendered long ago a worn-out household theme by Sir Piers.

When Cecil touched her hand, ever so gently, she felt every nerve in her body thrill with that exquisite sensibility which was a part of her nature. She saw how his colour changed at times, and *he* saw how hers did so too; she felt in her own heart the hesitation that was in *his* voice, and, with the quick perception of a young girl, thought to herself:

'Can it be that—that he loves me—loves me, and yet dare not say so?' and then she would think of the sweet love song of Montrose, about one who 'feared his fate too much.'

'I know that Cecil Falconer loves me!' she would whisper to Annabelle Erroll, in the seclusion of their own particular sanctum; 'his eyes, his voice, and his manner all begin to tell me so. Why does he not speak out? I wish he had half the fluency and confidence of that oaf Hew.'

'But Hew knows the wishes, and is backed by the authority of your kinsman and guardian, Sir Piers,' replied Annabelle; 'and if any contretemps occurs—you know——'

'Well—what then?'

'It will only be a thousand pities that young Falconer ever found his way to Eaglescraig at all!'

There were more of this opinion than the soft, pretty blonde Annabelle. A curious and subtle change had come over Mary—a change detected only by Mrs. Garth; as for Hew, he had been too obtuse to notice it; and over her fair soft face, when she was alone, or sunk in reverie, there shone a brighter light than of yore—a happier and yet more thoughtful expression.

Whence was this? thought Mrs. Garth.

'Take care, Mary,' said the old lady one day, when caressingly folding her to her motherly heart, as she was often wont to do; 'my little pet-bird, be wary, for your own sake, and all our sakes.'

'Wary of what?' asked Mary, growing pale, as she knew intuitively what was coming.

'Need I tell you—of this young Cameronian?'

'Why, how? fiddlestick! dearest Mrs. Garth; *what* do you fear?'

'Only this, you seem to forget the intentions of your grand-uncle, and the hope that your cousin Hew—for so we may call him—has for the future.'

These injunctions and remarks alarmed and irritated Mary; but they had the effect of rendering her somewhat shy or constrained when with Falconer. The duets at the piano nearly ceased, then a cold, or headache, or some such reason was urged why the drives in the pony-carriage should also cease, and they were abruptly relinquished. There was a little change; Falconer felt it, and was a little piqued; he remembered her wealth, and the scene in the avenue, and strove to crush out of his heart the thoughts he had been cherishing there. His short term of leave would soon be at an end; but could he go back to the dull routine of duty with this new secret of his soul untold?

Even if he won her love, his immediate idea of the future was vague and shadowy. It seemed to be chiefly the desire to know that she was his own, and would be so irrevocably; to have the sole right of caressing, doating upon, and worshipping her; but when marriage and fortune came to be considered, the deep gulf yawned again between them, and the cold hardness of practical everyday life jarred terribly with the soft suggestions of love, tenderness, and romance.

Should he consult Mrs. Garth, who seemed so kindly disposed towards him, or should he first seek the consent of Sir Piers? No; he felt very timid somehow, and shrunk from

the too probable crushing refusal, or biting inquiry as to the settlements he could make, his family, and so forth; he thought that he would rather try his fate with Mary herself, and 'put it to the touch to win or lose it all!'

He was already 'so far gone,' as Fotheringhame would have phrased it, that his happiness or misery was now simply the question. He made up his mind, or thought he did so, to declare his love to Mary, and he passed several hours in flattering, and anon in torturing himself by putting every imaginable construction on all that had ever passed between him and her, and between her and Hew, and all that the latter had said to him, suggested to him, and artfully led him to infer.

Luncheon—or 'tiffin' as the general always named it—was over, when one day Cecil, his soul fraught with a declaration, rose to follow Mary, who had gone into the library to look after the last parcel of books from Edinburgh; but ere he could join her he was button-holed by the inevitable general, and the opportunity was lost—perhaps luckily so—who knows?

'One glass more of Lafitte ere you leave me, Falconer,' said Sir Piers; 'are you going to take your gun?'

'No; I walked too far after the birds yesterday, and have rather knocked myself up.'

'You are too young a soldier to say this, Falconer. Knocked up—by Jove, sir!' exclaimed Sir Piers. 'Precisely this day twenty years ago I too was knocked up, but it was not by tramping through covers. It happened thus, you see. We were on the march from the banks of the Chumbul in Malwah, and the rain was incessant—yes, as if the windows of heaven were opened again. I was escorting prisoners, with some native infantry, and had to push on without food or natural rest, and exposed the while to incessant attacks from the Bheels, a savage mountain banditti, who practise human sacrifices in secret, and who were artfully incited to mischief by Holkar; and there was the very devil to pay when we came to the Chumbul Nullah, a terrible torrent, swollen by the rains—no rice for the men, no grain for the horses, which left their

shoes, when the nails declined to remain, in the mud. Heavy firing on all hands, the infernal Bheels with their matchlocks and jingals, and the elephants, under it all, trying to carry over the troops; when wounded the brutes became furious, shook prisoners and escort, soldiers' wives and soldiers' children, baggage, treasure, and everything out of the howdahs into the foaming torrent, and a horrible scene ensued—all who got ashore were massacred, save myself, and I only escaped by a perfect miracle. It happened this way, you see——'

How Sir Piers was saved Falconer never learned, for just then he contrived to make his escape, as Mr. John Balderstone, with a bundle of legal-looking documents, was announced on important business, and arrested the attention of the narrator.

Partly worried by the general's prosy interruption, and thus partly thwarted in his purpose, Cecil entered the library, unheard by its occupant; its floor was covered by rare tiger skins, sent home from India by the general, who had been a mighty hunter there, and had transmitted home enough of them to stock a bazaar, with their claws set in gold, as necklaces, earrings, and brooches to all the ladies of his acquaintance.

After one brief glance at the stately room, with its curtained bay windows, its walls covered by glittering volumes in splendid oak cases, its marble busts, easy chairs, and reading tables littered with papers, periodicals, prints, and drawing materials, Falconer's eye rested upon Mary Montgomerie, and his heart, full of love though it was, sank as he gazed—gazed on her in all her rare beauty.

She stood before the stately fireplace, looking intently into the bright flame, seeing castles in the embers perhaps, and a sense, momentarily akin to despair, stole over him: her graceful figure was so elegantly and richly attired in a costume so perfect in all its details and ornaments, from the tiny pearl comb that held up the close silky coils of her dark-brown hair, to the beautifully embroidered little slipper that rested on the fender—all indicated the gulf, that, though love might span it, too surely lay between them—a gulf formed by great wealth,

by family and high position on her side, and by the utter lack of these three important elements on his own.

He had followed her here, fraught with a proposal, and now he could but ask himself, Why had Fate brought him to Eaglescraig?

She turned suddenly, and welcomed him by a smile, a book in one white hand, the other resting on the mantelpiece, and he was half relieved—so unstable was he of purpose—when Annabelle Erroll issued from the recess of a window, saying:

'Oh, Mr. Falconer, you are just come here when I wanted you—so particularly, too.'

'I am glad of that—in what can I serve you?'

'By writing your autograph in my "Birthday Book,"' she replied, producing one of the records with which young ladies are wont to bore their friends—a handsomely bound little volume—a bijou freak of the time, wherein a motto from a poet, or a text from Scripture, was appended to each day of the twelve months. 'What is your birthday?'

'The fifth of November.'

'Gunpowder-plot day!' she exclaimed, laughing, as her quick little hand selected the page. 'Here it is—November 5—St. Bertille's day; and the motto is, "Man that is born of woman is of few days, and full of trouble."'

'Scriptural—but rather uncomfortable,' said Falconer, smiling, as he assumed a pen.

'Your days have not been days of trouble surely?' said Miss Montgomerie to him softly.

'My past days have not been without it,' replied Falconer, as a shade crossed his handsome face.

'And your future?'

'Heaven alone knows that—it depends upon another—not *myself*,' said he, with a brief soft glance that made her colour deepen and her eyelids droop, while he wrote his autograph immediately under that of Sir Piers, whose natal day was also the 5th—dedicated to the memory of Guy Fawkes and Inkermann.

'Cecil!' said Annabelle; 'such a pretty name it is—was it your father's name too?'

'No—I am named from my mother, in a way; her name was Cecilia.'

'How strange!'

'There is nothing strange in it at all,' rejoined Falconer gravely, and Mary could perceive that he coloured almost painfully, and the subject was instantly changed by her; yet it impressed her so much, that she mentioned the incident to her confidante and constant guide, old Mrs. Garth.'

'Named from his mother, and he has never been known to mention his father,' thought Mrs. Garth; 'there is some painful mystery here—and all mysteries are decidedly unpleasant! I must endeavour to arrest the progress of this *affair*, for the sake of both, ere it is too late! But how to do it, with sufficient tact and delicacy?'

And in this intention she had been further armed by the advice and opinion of Mr. John Balderstone, an old and valued friend and adherent of the Eaglescraig family, who had not been unobservant of the matter in question.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. GARTH ACTS A FRIENDLY PART.

Nor was the opportunity she wished for long in coming, in the many chances afforded by propinquity, and a residence in the same house; though, in one full of guests, it was difficult to get the object of her solicitude alone.

That afternoon, in the drawing-room, Cecil Falconer and Mary were at the piano; the general preparing for a visit to his stables, as it was rainy, and none could go far abroad; Annabelle Erroll and a few other visitors were idling over books of prints, albums, and other trifles; and Mrs. Garth, observant of

the two first-named, with something of sadness and impatience in her heart, was in her usual seat near the fireplace, sheltered from the heat by a plate-glass screen, and knitting busily, for she was always knitting as if her livelihood depended upon it —but her industry was all devoted to the comforts of the poor, for she had a kind heart, having known much suffering 'in her time,' as she was wont to say, and thus was ever ready, so far as her slender means went, to aid those who were necessitous, or troubled in any way.

She was tall and thin in figure, and not without dignity in her bearing, with a look of calm and patient waiting in her soft and gentle eyes, which were clear and bright as those of a young girl, albeit her face was wrinkled and her silky hair was grey. Sometimes their expression seemed cold and sad, when her thoughts travelled backward into the past; yet no eyes could laugh in expression more merrily than hers, at times.

Like Sir Piers, and most old people, she lived more in the past than in the present, and he, just then, with his feet planted on the hearthrug, while listening with a pleasant smile to an Italian duet, of which he did not understand one word, was busy with that most tantalising of all mental exercises, groping amid vanished years for some fugitive reminiscence that the face and voice of Cecil Falconer had summoned up.

Was it his old comrade Garth he resembled, or who? But Sir Piers had seen and known so many men in his time, that day-dreams of them were no cause for marvel.

'How the time passes!' said he, looking smilingly down on the old lady; 'yet I can remember you a charming girl, when you joined the Cameronians, Mrs. Garth; and that was not yesterday!'

'Well, general,' replied the widow, with a gratified smile on her old face, 'there were worse-looking girls, I dare say, and I had more than one offer before I was twenty; but I preferred poor John Garth to all the world.'

'And right you were—right you were!' said Sir Piers emphatically. 'Poor John Garth! I shall never forget his fine

conduct on the morning we stormed the hill-fort of the Nabob Ali Nazir-jung (or the victorious in war), as he boasted himself, in the Doab between the Jhelum and the Chenab. It was a strange affair,' he continued, relating an anecdote as well known to Mrs. Garth as to himself, yet to which she listened with a kindling eye; 'we sunk our half-sap by degrees and pushed it close to the outworks, covering our men by gabions, sand-bags, and mantelets, and the assault was to take place an hour before gunfire, or daybreak. I remember how lovely the night was! A breeze stole up the hillside and stirred the golden bells of the scented baubul-trees; the moon in her silver glory, like a round shield, was mirrored in the bosom of the Jhelum, and the stormers were beginning to creep into the advanced trench, where we could see their bayonets glittering and their white puggarees behind the shade of the gabions. Just as Jack Garth and I were having a farewell cheroot and drain of brandy-pawnee, Drake, of the Bengal Infantry, who had been detailed to lead the assault, came into our tent looking pale as a sheeted ghost.

'Now Drake was no coward: he had been under fire many times in open ground; but somehow he felt that to lead a forlorn hope was a very different thing; in short, almost certain death; and having led a wild, terrible, irregular, and most irreligious life, his whole soul had suddenly become filled with an uncontrollable dread and dismay of the impending future.

'He told us of the strange emotion that possessed him—he seemed somehow not to care of making a secret of it, to us at least—and Garth instantly and cheerfully offered to take his place, and Drake was to join the covering force. The brigadier commanding permitted the exchange; the place was carried by storm at a wild and headlong rush; Jack Garth, leading the escalade like a hero, reached the heart of the fort untouched, while poor Drake, after the affair was deemed entirely over, and the firing had ceased, was killed by a random shot that came no one knew precisely from where.'

By the time the general had ended his anecdote, and betaken him to the stables to inspect the hock sinews of Mary's favourite pad, of which Pastern, the groom, had made some evil report, the duet was over.

Mrs. Garth had detected the mutual tenderness in tone and expression of eye as it ended, and when the singers left the piano, she resolved to lose no time in seeking to avert, if she could, the trouble which she feared was impending. Not that she loved Hew Montgomerie, but she thought alone of Mary's interests and the wishes of Sir Piers, her oldest, kindest, and best of friends.

But now, when Cecil Falconer approached her, she thought, as Sir Piers had done more than once :

'What is there in this young fellow's face that touches, that interests me? Where have I seen that look before? In India, I doubt not.'

'I heard the general's anecdote of your husband, Mrs. Garth, even while we were singing,' said he, bending over the old lady's chair; 'he must have been a fine old officer, and I can assure you that his memory is still fresh in the regiment.'

Her face brightened with genuine pleasure as he said this, and her eyes filled with tears.

'You see the relic I wear of him,' said the widow, placing her hand affectionately upon a brooch she wore on her heart, a silver sphinx, which had whilom been a regimental ornament, but which she would not have exchanged for the regal brooch of Lorne; 'and now, if you will come with me, I shall show you his portrait.'

'Thanks,' replied Cecil, and a parting glance was exchanged between him and Mary as he left the room and followed Mrs. Garth across a corridor, hung, like many other parts of the house, with Indian trophies of war and the chase.

Falconer thought he was only to hear about her past and pet memories of the corps; but he did not foresee that he must hear much more that he would rather not have heard at all. Nor could he suspect that her primary object was to get

him alone for her own well-meant purpose, or, as she deemed it, his future peace of mind and the welfare of Mary Montgomerie.

'This is my peculiar sanctum, Mr. Falconer,' said she, when ushering him into a cosily and handsomely furnished parlour, 'and here I keep all my relics of the dead and of other times, and have done so since I found a happy and contented home in Eaglescraig,' she added, glancing at an old iron-bound baggage-trunk that had been at Bengal, China, Bermuda, and all round the world with the Cameronians, and at two regimental swords crossed upon the wall: one the weapon of her husband, the other that of her son, a joyous boyish ensign, who had fallen in a vile skirmish with a hill-tribe; shot under the colours, on a day when matchlock balls were flying thick, and 'human lives were lavished everywhere.'

And there now hung the sword that had failed him in the hot hour of trial.

Over the old but handsome face of Mrs. Garth there spread an expression of sweetness and sadness mingled, as she showed Falconer the miniatures of her husband and their dead soldier-son; the latter as an infant, with a lock of his golden hair, which she had worn at her heart for twenty years and more, treasured, like all his school-boy letters, in the sad but loving superstition of the heart, in memory of him and of that day when the troops fell in and he went with the Cameronians 'to the front,' to be brought back to her across six muskets, mortally wounded, to die, while calling on her name, thanking her for her love, and dying with his head upon her breast, as calmly as he had fallen asleep there when an infant. And so he died thus, as his father had died but a few weeks before him.

'The will of God be done!' said Mrs. Garth, in a sorely broken voice; 'for it was His will that I was to lose them, and that they were to precede me. But Heaven is just, and teaches us that there is a brighter and a better world than this!'

Borne away by her own private or personal sympathies, she almost forgot the purpose for which she had invited Falconer to

visit her little sanctum, till he unwillingly recalled it to her memory; as, with all his commiseration for her loneliness, he began to tire of the great many stories she told him of the excellencies of her only daughter—a girl so amiable and so handsome—who had married a curate in the West Indies, a good young fellow, who was so and so, and so and so; of the noble qualities of her son, the poor ensign, and those of the defunct Captain John Garth, who, 'poor dear soul, had been dead and gone—dead and gone—deary me, how—ever so many years ago.' Thus Cecil—though there was certainly a cheerful gossipy quality in Mrs. Garth, that rendered her a very attractive old lady—ventured to say:

'And now, Mrs. Garth, you must excuse me. Miss Montgomerie is expecting me to attempt that duet over once more with her, ere we duly perform it for some guests that come this evening. How sweetly she sings, and with exquisite taste! But, indeed, how perfect she is in all things!'

'A dear child! I think you admire her?' began the widow, now remembering her task, and suddenly making a leading remark.

'Admire! ah, who could fail to admire her?' exclaimed Falconer warmly, and with kindling eye.

'She is a charming girl—ever was a sweet child—and I am so happy about her future, Mr. Falconer,' said Mrs. Garth, resuming her knitting, without however raising her eyes to him she addressed.

'Her future?'

'With Hew—I mean—you understand me of course?'

'Hew?'

'Yes,' she continued softly and gently, reluctantly, too, for she was loth to give him pain, 'Hew Montgomerie. In her circumstances, and with her wealth and its consequent and contingent responsibilities, it has been with us all an anxious matter, that she should choose well and wisely in the world of marriage; and thus, with Sir Piers' heir of entail, she will be the tenth Lady Montgomerie, without changing her name! Curious that,

is it not? It cannot fail to be a most fortunate alliance; but I shall not intrude upon you, whom we have only had the pleasure of knowing so recently, these private family matters.'

Cecil's heart grew cold as a stone, while he listened and heard Hew's remarks thus corroborated by what, Mrs. Garth felt with regret, must pain him, but deemed it for his future good to hear.

In reply to some half-muttered inquiry (he could not fashion it as a congratulation) she, by way of explanation and intended advice, said distinctly much more than even Hew had done. She told him, in detail, of Mary's large fortune; and how entirely Mary and it were—by the tenor of her father's will—at the behest of Sir Piers Montgomerie, whose great and sole object was to consolidate the wealth of the family in the person of Hew Caddish Montgomerie, his heir of entail, who, even with ancient Eaglescraig alone, would not be rich, and who would be the tenth baronet in succession from Sir Hew, who had been made one for his loyalty and valour in the battles of Montrose, particularly at Tippermuir, in 1644; and thus, that even a duke might lay, in vain, his coronet at the feet of Mary Montgomerie!

Pride of birth, and in his own family, of the old line of Eaglescraig, almost a collateral one with the House of Eglinton, had been, from youth, a passion with Sir Piers—a passion that had caused the ruin of his only son—and so on, with an earnest tone, a sad, yet gentle smile, she continued, for his own good as she supposed, to plant (warningly) certain daggers in the heart of her hearer.

'They do not seem much suited to each other, Miss Montgomerie and her intended,' suggested Falconer in a low voice, after a pause.

'Ah, so you think—so you think; but when "Love's young dream" and the honeymoon are over, they will settle down, I have no doubt, into a very happy, loving, and jog-trot couple.'

'It is well that you have told me all this in time,' said Falconer, preserving his calmness of voice and feature by an incredible

effort, for if he had mistrusted Hew he could not mistrust Mrs. Garth, who could have no selfish or sinister object in view; 'and I am—most grateful to you.'

'To me—for what?' asked Mrs. Garth, as if she knew not his meaning, though she never looked up, but continued to knit nervously and fast, with tremulous fingers.

'I was, in fact, beginning to admire the general's ward perhaps too much,' he replied, with a sickly attempt at a laugh; 'but now I must think of her only as the intended bride of another.'

'And learn to laugh over the country-house flirtation.'

'Does she love Mr. Hew Montgomerie?'

'I cannot doubt it, though her ways of showing it are certainly shy and peculiar; but then I see, and have seen, more of him and her than you have done, Mr. Falconer.'

'You are sure she will consent to this marriage?' said Cecil, scarcely knowing what he said.

'Yes, most assuredly; if not now, at a later period, for there is no precise reason for haste, unless it be Hew's Indian appointment.'

A silence ensued for a minute or so, during which Cecil heard only the click of the knitting-needles and the beating of his heart.

'Of what are you thinking?' asked Mrs. Garth, looking up with a smile, and then lowering her eyes again, as the pain she read in his face distressed her.

'I am thinking how to collect my ideas,' said he, in a broken voice; 'to reflect on my position, and the information you have given me, with the useful warning contained in it. In two or three days more my leave will be up, and I shall have, inexorably, to depart from a house in which the happiest moments of my life have been spent; yet, which I would to Heaven I had never entered!'

Then, as he left her, Mrs. Garth felt that all her suspicions had been justified; yet, with him, she approached the subject no more.

'I have done the deed! as Macbeth says,' thought she, looking after him; 'poor fellow—poor dear fellow! He seems sorely cut up; but it is all for the best—all for the best! How sad his handsome face looked: and of *whom* does that face remind me? My own dear boy's surely!'

Cecil Falconer was full of jealous anger and deep mortification. He could not, in his present mood of mind, rejoin Mary Montgomerie, and so he took himself to the loneliest part of the garden to smoke and think—to have that universal panacea to all men in trouble, doubt, or difficulties—a mild 'weed.' Moreover, there is a solitude we are prone to seek at times, even amid our fondest affections.

A tender love for Mary had grown in his heart; but—apart from a meagre exchequer—his lack of family rank was painfully thrust upon him now by every word Mrs. Garth had, he thought, unconsciously uttered.

In his lonely hours, like most young men of imagination and of those given to day-dreaming, he had been wont—though well-nigh nameless—to identify himself with the 'Ivanhoes' of romance and history—the disinherited and disguised princes of boyish tales, and so forth, weaving out a brilliant future for himself! But now!

Now, like Alnaschar in the Arabian tale, his basket of crystal was smashed; and yet he could have no future in which Mary Montgomerie was not to bear an imaginary part.

He was aware that his family pretensions, when judged by the lofty heraldic and genealogical standards of Sir Piers Montgomerie, were as meagre as his monetary could be, and the double consciousness thereof, though failing to influence his heart, had almost utterly fettered his tongue.

These were the reasons why Cecil Falconer did not declare himself as yet, or try conclusions with Hew Montgomerie, but now he had others—more solid and more cruel. It was, however, the old story of the moth and the candle. Mrs. Garth had done much to crush and damp all hope in the heart of Cecil, but could not prevent him from indulging in the perilous

charm of Mary's society to the last hours of his now-expiring leave of absence — leave granted 'between returns,' as the technical phrase is.

So that night the duet was not sung, greatly to Mrs. Garth's satisfaction, and somewhat to the surprise and disappointment of Mary Montgomerie, to whom Cecil urged that he was afflicted by a sudden cold, a hoarseness and so forth; so to his seductive tenor she was unable to make the usually tender soprano replies.

CHAPTER X.

A CRISIS.

HEW returned suddenly from Bickerton—Hew of the shifty eyes and cold, fish-like hands—more indignant than ever with 'Old Pipeclay,' as he irreverently called Sir Piers.

Old Mr. John Balderstone, the family factor, who had been enjoying some shooting at the Bickerton covers, had incidentally and laughingly mentioned having seen Cecil Falconer and Mary Montgomerie twice in her pony-carriage at a considerable distance from home; and thus Hew had returned full of ire at the folly of Sir Piers in having 'invited that fellow to Eagles-craig,' at the presumption of the latter, and with his heart full of secret rage, jealousy, and no little rancour for the result of the last game at écarté.

Before this time, Cecil perhaps cared little what Hew said or thought of his manner with Mary Montgomerie, so far as friendly intercourse went. Thus Hew had more than once seen him bending carelessly over Mary as he addressed her, bending till his dark brown moustache almost touched her darker glossy hair. But then, his whole manner to her might be described as one long caress, though he was ever courteous to all women, even the old and plain looking; while Mary thought it new and charming, and something that even in society she was unused to.

But now there was a sudden change. The result of Mrs. Garth's friendly advice was, that doubt, reserve, and smothered irritation—born of a suspicion that he had been trifled with, or played with—tinged the manner of Cecil Falconer, infusing therein a peculiar strangeness that piqued Mary Montgomerie, and made their intercourse more perilous, for, being somewhat of a little coquette, it was one of her idiosyncrasies, when so piqued, to avoid a reconciliation that was too openly affected, and shyly, or slyly, to take refuge in those which were merely, and silently, implied.

The communications of the old lady had forced upon him the necessity for sedulously seeking to forget, as soon as possible, the existence of Mary; and how far such an effort was consistent with spending the hours of every day in her society may be imagined.

In the first fever of his spirit he felt inclined to quit Eaglescraig at once, ere his leave was up, and to get Fotheringhame to telegraph for him; but anon he resolved to linger till the last moment, and sun himself in the eyes of Mary; and in the midst of all this Hew now returned, like the shadow of evil, to Eaglescraig, suddenly, and not finding either Mary or Cecil in the house, had his spleen further roused on being told by the watchful Mrs. Garth that they were rambling somewhere in the grounds together.

'In the grounds,' said Hew viciously; 'where?'

'I know not,' replied Mrs. Garth; 'but if you will absent yourself shooting here and there, Mary must avail herself of the courtesy of others.'

'Of course—to help her to water her ferns, which she does indefatigably, although a staff of gardeners are kept here at Eaglescraig.'

'And to feed her favourite pigeons at the dovecot.'

'How touchingly domestic; how d——d Arcadian!' said Hew, more viciously than ever. 'Are they on the lawn?'

'No; I think they took the path that leads to the grotto,' replied Mrs. Garth, not unwilling to pique the jealousy of Hew,

who muttered an ugly word, and at once left the house to seek them in their ramble.

For this circumstance Sir Piers was in some measure to blame, as he had desired Mary to show Falconer a curious grotto, or cavern, partly natural and partly artificial, under the old tower of Eaglescraig, in which tradition said some centuries ago, when the wall which had concealed it fell, a so-called magic lamp had been discovered hanging from a chain in the rocky roof. The flame, when first seen, was thought to be a Jack-o'-lantern, but was found to proceed from what was supposed to be an ancient sepulchral lamp, prepared with matter spontaneously combustible on the accession of air, and which, instead of burning for centuries, had only taken light when the grotto was opened.

Be all that as it may, neither Cecil nor Mary troubled themselves much about the archæology of the place, though they certainly lingered there, they scarcely knew why, and she clung to his arm, for the mouth of the grotto opened inwards from the rock on which the mansion stood, and overlooked the Firth of Clyde, three hundred feet below.

Alone with Mary there, Cecil felt that he was becoming more devoted and *empressé* every moment, in spite of his recent resolutions and the warnings of Mrs. Garth.

Their conversation was somewhat disjointed and desultory, especially so far as Cecil was concerned; for the eve of his departure was drawing near; he knew not when, or if ever, he might see Mary Montgomerie again, and the great secret of his heart loaded his tongue. But the faltering accents and broken language of love are generally expressions of the fullest eloquence to her who hears them; and now, filled by all the charm her presence inspired, while gazing into her face, which had all the soul-like beauty that radiates from *within*, Cecil Falconer felt his heart flying to his head, and while pressing to his side the little hand that leant upon his arm, he said:

'Another day—only one short day more—and this time of joy, so sweet to me, will have become a thing of the past—a dream—but a past never to be forgotten!'

'I am glad that you have been happy with us—we live so quietly here at Eaglescraig,' she replied, affecting to misunderstand what he so evidently referred to.

'Happy indeed! But who could fail to be happy here? I am much of a day-dreamer, Miss Montgomerie, and often it has seemed to me, in my solitary moments and thoughtful moods, that some mysterious sympathy or bond was linking my existence with that of another, but who that other was I knew not.'

'A strange idea!'

'You will smile at my folly, as you no doubt deem it. So, too, have I thought there was something singularly sweet in the idea, but sweeter still now that I know the soul that I dreamed of was *you*.'

Mary's hand trembled on his arm, but she made no reply, and stood with half-averted face.

'My lips have been silent,' he resumed, bending over her, as she still further averted her face and looked down; 'yet you must have guessed the cherished hope of my heart, and learned, even from my glance—that I—that—that I love you!'

So Mrs. Garth's friendly warnings all came to nothing, and even Hew's existence was forgotten!

'I saw from the first,' said Mary, in a low and agitated voice, 'from the first, that you admired me, but—but, I never thought that——'

'That I loved you?'

'I know not what I thought.'

'Oh, Mary—may I call you so?—I have no words to tell you, Mary, darling, how fondly, how deeply and tenderly I love you!'

Her hands were in his now, and her long lashes were cast down, during a little pause that ensued, and he could see her soft bosom heaving under her dress.

Then she looked up with a coy, shy smile of great brightness, as she asked:

'Am I the first you have loved—the very first?'

'Fancies I have had—as what lad has not?—but I never loved till now, Mary,' he replied, with great tenderness, 'unless it was the love I bore my poor mother, who is now in her grave.'

'I am so confused—so startled, Mr. Falconer.'

'Do say "Cecil," I implore you!'

'Well, then—Cecil.'

No need to say more just then, as their lips met, passionately for an instant, and Cecil felt that she was his own. Then Mary shrank back a little, and blushing deeply, said:

'Oh, what would Sir Piers say if he knew of this?'

There was something of terror in her tone—alarm, at least, as Cecil thought.

'When I tell him of my love for you——' he began.

'Oh, that you must not—must not do—yet awhile, at least!' she exclaimed earnestly.

'Why, my darling?'

'Don't ask me—do not ask me! Be content that—that——'

'You love me?'

'Oh, Cecil—yes. But your love for me—when did it first begin?' she asked, looking up with the same fond yet shy smile again on her soft face.

'Heaven only knows—when I first saw you, without a doubt,' replied Falconer, drawing her towards him. 'But now tell me, darling——'

Ere he could say more, she shrank from him. A step was heard on the gravelled path, Snarley growled and showed his teeth, and Hew appeared close by them, at the mouth of the grotto—Hew, with a very dubious and mingled expression on his face.

'Have you not heard the gong sound for luncheon?' he asked curtly and sulkily.

'Hew—returned already!' said Mary, blushing deeply.

'So soon—yes,' said he.

'Had good shooting at Bickerton?' asked Cecil Falconer,

feeling that it required a double effort to be complaisant to Hew just then, and to slide into the commonplaces required by society.

'Pretty fairish—knocked over a few rocketers or so. There were ten guns out. But how do *you two* come to be here?' he asked bluntly and almost rudely.

'Sir Piers requested Miss Montgomerie to show me where an ancient lamp had been found,' replied Cecil, with some annoyance of manner.

Hew muttered something unpleasant under his moustache, as he thought that the 'ancient lamp' had thrown more light on their proceedings than he anticipated, and drawing Mary's arm through his own, he said sharply and curtly:

'Let us go back to the house, or we shall be late.'

Cecil's handsome mouth was compressed with sternness at the abruptness of Hew's bearing, tone, and words. His small well-cut nostrils quivered, and his eyes flashed with the anger which, despite his recent joy, he felt a difficulty in restraining.

Hew was sharp enough to see this; but feeling himself somewhat master of the situation, and a species of marplot, he gave one of his strange smiles, and said something that might mean anything or nothing, as he appropriated Mary and marched off with her towards the house.

How long he might have been eavesdropping, and how much or how little of their conversation he might have overheard, or what he might have overseen, it was impossible for them to conjecture; but extreme annoyance clouded the fair face of Mary, and bitter chagrin was but ill concealed in that of Falconer.

'Pray do not quarrel with Hew,' Mary found opportunity to say in a rapid whisper; 'you know not his power in the art of scheming, manœuvring, and mischief.'

Cecil felt his heart beat lightly again at the interest in him implied by her words, and the secret understanding they suggested and created.

Though we doubt very much if Mr. Hew Caddish Mont-

gomerie ever heard of the Bard of Twickenham, yet we are certain that he believed with him, that 'every woman is at heart a rake;' and thus he was the more irate with Mary, as he was prone to take the worst view of every one and everything.

As they pursued the circuitous path that led from the grotto to the house, Hew maintained a somewhat sulky silence, as he had neither the good feeling nor the good taste to conceal his annoyance. He, perhaps, loved Mary; but if so, it was after a selfish fashion of his own, and as much as it was in him to love anyone. He knew her fortune to a shilling; he had a passionate, an inherited, and avaricious love of wealth, and he knew right well the vast importance that attached to the possession of it; thus he took Mary to task, the moment Falconer left them—with a glance, which Mary read, though to Hew it was all unseen, or misunderstood.

'Were you and that fellow long in the grounds to-day?' he asked bluntly, and with anger in his eyes.

'What if we were?' was the defiant reply.

'I asked you a question, cousin.'

'One you have no right to ask.'

'No right?'

'None!' said she, with decision.

'Come, I like that! I am your cousin.'

'Nothing more, thank goodness!—and scarcely even that, save by name; and you are not my mentor.'

'If I were so——'

'Well, sir; if you were?'

'I should say that I was extremely sorry to meet you and Falconer together, as I met you just now. I consider it most unseemly.'

'Are you my guardian, Hew?' asked the little beauty, with growing irritation.

'Would that I were so, legally!'

'I cannot agree with you,' responded Mary, with a merry laugh.

'I regret to see how this intimacy has grown between you and an utter stranger.'

'Pray what can it matter to you who my gentlemen friends are?'

'How can you adopt this tone to me, knowing what you do of Sir Piers' intentions, Mary? As for this fellow——'

'Fellow? What has he done to offend you, Hew Montgomerie, that you speak of him in this style?'

'I was only about to remark that, like Oliver Twist, I have no doubt that he can trace his genealogy all the way back to his parents—to his mother, at least, for I suppose he has, or had, such a relative,' was the coarse and bitter sneer of Hew; 'but that measure of ancestry will scarcely suit the standard of Sir Piers Montgomerie.'

Mary remembered the little episode of the 'Birthday Book,' and her heart for a moment sank, and her countenance fell.

'What *do* you mean?' she asked.

'I know—what I know—that is all,' replied Hew malevolently.

'And I know that you are extremely rude and ill-bred,' said Mary, as she swept away from him, and with difficulty restrained her tears, while Hew looked after her with a scowl that was strangely mingled with a triumphant smile.

He did not knit his eyebrows, for he had little or nothing in that way to knit; but his closely-set eyes twinkled viciously and furtively, as he began to feel that the power he once possessed, or hoped to possess, over Mary, and more especially over her fortune, was slipping away; and the emotions of wounded pride, disappointment, avarice, and an odious passion for her that was not love, grew keenly and stingingly in his heart.

Next day Cecil's leave would be up, and in the interval, so sedulously did Hew keep guard, that never again had Cecil a chance of addressing Mary alone; but the rival, while thus employed, could see with growing rancour that they looked suspiciously amiable and happy, and could talk confidentially

enough with their eyes, if prevented from doing so with their tongues; and now, to preclude any fresh invitations on the general's part, or any further extension of the hospitality of Eaglescraig, Hew resolved, ere their guest departed, to do him all the mischief he could with his host.

CHAPTER XI.

HEW MAKES MISCHIEF.

FINDING, as we have shown, that any appeal to Mary Montgomerie was vain, Hew determined, as he muttered, to give the general 'an eye-opener on the subject.'

He knew that 'a jilted suitor is hopelessly and irreparably ridiculous, and that the jilt is apt to score the honours.' Without an engagement existing between them, there could be no jilting in the case of him and Mary, but in his blind, unmeaning hate of Falconer, his jealousy and avarice, he never thought of that; and only considered that the wishes of Sir Piers and himself, and the object for which he had been deliberately brought home from India, were on the point of being baffled, or set utterly aside, by the intervention of an unexpected interloper, to blacken and defeat whom was but just and right, he deemed, on his own part, and in his own behalf.

Without a just cause he had been from the first instinctively the foe of Cecil Falconer; and ill-founded enmities, it is said, are ever the most obstinate and bitter.

He found Sir Piers in the library, lounging in an easy-chair, smoking a beautiful hookah which he had brought with him from India, and deep in the pages of the *Field*.

'Can I have your attention for a little time, Sir Piers?' he asked.

'Yes, my boy; fire away. About what do you wish to speak?'

'A subject very near my heart, as you know,' replied Hew,

leaning on the back of the old baronet's chair: 'Mary Montgomerie.'

'God bless the dear girl!' exclaimed Sir Piers, as his brightening eyes were raised inquiringly to Hew's face. 'It is time some arrangement were made by you and her; for Mary deserves the purest and best love the heart of man can offer her.'

'Such love is mine, dear Sir Piers,' whined Hew.

'I hope so.'

But I come not to speak of that.'

'Of what, then?'

'Of Mary and your new friend, Falconer.'

'Falconer!' exclaimed Sir Piers, staring blankly at Hew through his gold eye-glasses.

'Seriously, sir, it seems to me that, thanks to the propinquity your unwise hospitality has afforded them, Mary is drifting, with that fellow Falconer, the way that many other young ladies have drifted before her.'

'What does this mean?' exclaimed Sir Piers, wheeling his chair sharply round. 'Worry, of course; and, d—n it! I am getting too old to have any worry—had enough of it in my time, up country! Has propinquity not helped you? Gad, sir, in my day, I should like to have seen the biped that could turn my flank with any girl; but why the devil don't you push the trenches yourself?'

'But don't you think they have become too intimate?' asked Hew, with growing irritation.

'Why? How?'

'With all this singing, music, and philandering.'

'Pooh! not at all. Let them amuse themselves. I was once their age. It is no use making a fuss; but why the deuce don't you cut in, and sing, play, and philander too, as you call it? Besides, Falconer in a few hours now returns to Dumbarton, or to head-quarters, and there is an end of it all! To me, Hew, it seems natural enough that young Falconer should be attracted by our Mary; but, aware of her position, of my views and your wishes, and more than all, your prospects and

rank when I am gone,' he added, glancing at a portrait of his dead son, 'I should very much doubt if she encouraged any particular attention on his part.'

'There I don't agree with you; and when once a girl's heart becomes warped, or interested in a fellow, she cares little what his rank or position may be; and of this Falconer's family or antecedents we know nothing.'

'True, by Jove!' said Sir Piers, whose pet weakness was now interested. 'He seemed not to know, himself, which I thought odd. I wonder what arms he uses? The Halkertoun family carried *azure*, a falcon *argent* crowned with a ducal crown.'

'Arms!' said Hew, with a mocking laugh. 'If all I suspect be true, his have been quartered and attested by the Blue Bottle Herald and Pimlico Pursuivant. But apart from his dangling after Mary, I have my own reasons for feeling glad that Eagles-craig will soon be rid of him.'

'He is a presentable young fellow—a Cameronian too, and bears her Majesty's commission,' urged Sir Piers in favour of Falconer, whom he really liked; 'but what are the personal reasons you refer to?'

'Because in a little time he would have rooked—ruined me!'

'How?'

'At écarté.'

'At écarté?'

'Yes. Before I went to Bickerton—to keep out of his way, in fact—he inveigled me to play, night after night, when all others had retired. My play is always mild—but his was *wild!* His constant phrase was that it was so *ennuyant* to play for low stakes, so we always doubled, and even trebled, them—I always losing.'

'Why?'

'Because,' replied Hew deliberately, while a malevolent gleam shot from his parti-coloured eyes, 'it is seldom safe to play écarté, or piquet either, after dinner, and when drinking brandy-and-soda with a fellow who takes nothing—is too wary to do so.'

'And so you have lost?' said Sir Piers, flushing with indignation.

'Fearfully; and I suspect the scoundrel was in the habit of dropping his cards.'

'What!' roared Sir Piers, aghast. 'The devil! Do you say so?' He pinched his gold eyeglasses tighter on his high aristocratic nose, and absolutely glared through them at Hew, as he turned his keen face full round to await what he had to say, and with a face expressive of intense chagrin, disappointment, and dismay.

'I do not say so—I only suspect,' said Hew, afraid that he, in the extremity of his malice, had roused a storm it might be difficult to quell, or see the end of.

'And he is one of the Cameronians!' exclaimed Sir Piers, in an agitated voice. 'Gad! in my time, he would have had his hands tied behind his back, and been drummed to the barrack-gate. Do you actually tell me this? Gambling, in camp or quarters, *I* never permitted for a moment—they are strictly forbidden by the thirty-fourth paragraph of the sixth section of the Queen's Regulations. But the idea of gambling and cheating at Eaglescraig! D—me, I'll explode! I remember that, when we were cantoned at Jubbulpore, before we were relieved by the Seventy-Eighth, with bag, baggage, and twelve bagpipes——'

'But our play is ended now, Sir Piers—once and for ever!' interrupted Hew, as he shivered at the idea of an Indian anecdote, which was certain to follow whenever Sir Piers mounted his Oriental hobby-horse.

'Ended; I should think so! But, as we used to say in India, beware of a black Brahmin and a white pariah!'

The point of this aphorism was not very apparent; but Hew, satisfied that he had now completely ruined Cecil Falconer so far as Sir Piers was concerned, was so well pleased that he listened to a sudden Bengal narrative of a thirty days' march, amid the horrors of Dacoits and Thugs, swamps and jungles, tigers and snakes, dismounted guns and broken bones,

dead bullocks and swollen rivers; and then, after a pause, during which the baronet had been reflecting with knitted brows, he said:

'But to return to the first subject, Hew. Do you mean to tell me, and do you seriously think, that this—a—a—person, *has* made any undue impression upon her—upon Mary?'

'From my soul I do, sir, and know it to my bitter cost!'

Another angry malediction escaped the general.

'I cannot desire him to leave my house, though right well disposed to do so,' said he; 'but a little time will see him gone now, thank Heaven! I am deeply concerned by what you tell me, my dear Hew; all the more so, that I have been the unwitting means of bringing all this unforeseen mischief to pass.'

'Only an hour ago I interrupted a little scene in the grotto there could be no mistaking! He was bending tenderly over her, and uttering sighs that would have softened the heart of a pawnbroker.'

'Don't use such odious similes, Hew!' exclaimed Sir Piers. 'Whatever may be the personal merits or demerits of this young man,' he continued, with an angry laugh, 'apart from my firm intentions, your wishes, and Mary's own future welfare, it would never do for her to make a *mésalliance*—to throw herself away upon an ambitious adventurer, on whose name there too evidently rests the stain of obscurity, at least. It is well that he is going, Hew! I want no other catastrophe, no second fiasco, to occur to a Montgomerie of Eaglescraig!' he added, with deep and sorrowful frown, as he referred to a family episode we shall have to relate ere long. 'But here comes Mary, most opportunely. Leave us, Hew, and I shall talk with her alone.'

As Hew retired, with disappointed passion and gratified revenge curiously mingled in his face, the thought flashed upon the mind of Sir Piers that expostulation or advice might only prove futile, and, by exciting opposition, make the matter worse (as he had bitterly experienced once before in his life),

though he knew not how far the matter had gone, or how deeply love had taken root in the hearts of both Mary and Falconer. Moreover, he thought that as separation, which he deemed a safe cure, was so close at hand, it might be better to ignore the communications of Hew, and let matters, after Falconer's departure, fall into their old routine, yet having the intended marriage of Mary and his heir pressed forward, in spite of all opposition; but now, the sudden and apparently opportune entrance of the fair culprit herself overset his calmer calculations.

CHAPTER XII.

CECIL'S DEPARTURE.

THOUGH indignant at Falconer, Sir Piers could scarcely find it in his heart to be angry with Mary, she was so sweet and winning—his dead kinsman's one ewe lamb, committed to his care. She had been to him as the child of his old age, taking the place of that only son whose death he had never ceased to lament; she, who by her affection, in the thousand nameless little recurring trifles of life, as a tender and loving daughter rather than a grand-niece, had made herself so useful and necessary to him.

Mary had come in search of a book, a passage in which she meant to show Cecil, whom she had left with Annabelle Erroll, when Sir Piers summoned her to his side; and though she saw a gloom on his fine old face, the cause of which she dreaded and suspected to have been Hew, who had just quitted the room, she seated herself on a velvet tabouret, near her guardian's own chair, and nestling at his knee as she had been wont to do when a little girl, she drew one of his shrivelled hands caressingly over her handsome head, and, looking up smilingly, said:

'Well, grand-uncle darling, what have you to say to me?'

'Much, Mary—yet a few words may suffice,' he replied, as

the lines faded out of his face. He had at first resolved to be very stern and irate with her; but he reserved all his bitterness for Falconer. 'Am I right when I say that I have been given to understand that Mr. Falconer has forgotten his place as a guest in my house, and dared to address you surreptitiously in language other than a mere friend or guest may do?'

At this question, so sententiously put, Mary blushed painfully, and then grew very pale indeed, for her heart was yet vibrating with its new-found joy, and the memory of that kiss, the first that was ever given her by any man save old Sir Piers himself.

'Has he attempted to win for himself that affection which should belong to another?'

'Oh, grand-uncle, what do you mean?' asked Mary piteously, and feeling quite overwhelmed.

'What I ask, Mary; and I wish you to know, further, that he is everyway unworthy the consideration of any girl—wholly unworthy the kindness I have wasted on him.'

'Unworthy!' repeated Mary faintly; and yet her heart rebelled, for she now recognised the malevolent influence of Hew.

'I have other views for your future, as you know, dear Mary—views long cherished and most dear to me, and I am not going to have my plans and prospects marred by a fortune-hunting subaltern and a romantic girl's folly. Understand me, Mary, and the power your father's will has given me over you and your fortune.'

Mary remained silent, but tears welled up in her eyes—tears that sprang from emotions of anger as much as annoyance and intense mortification.

'I don't object to the fellow because he is a subaltern, with little, if anything, more than his pay,' said Sir Piers, as if ashamed of using the military rank as an adjective; 'but I do object to this, Mary, as your guardian and only kinsman, in whose hands the whole of your fortune is vested, to bestow, so far as possible, on my heir of entail, who is to share it with

you. But here, if all I am told is true, you have been tempted —you, with beauty and attractions that might win a coronet— you, with an inheritance, and certainly with a name, second to none in Scotland—to cast your lot, perhaps, with one destitute of position, save that which a commission gives him—one without family or friends either, so far as we know,' continued the general, nursing or talking himself into a fit of anger; 'as Hew has hinted, the first of his race—a gambler, too——'

'A gambler, grand-uncle?'

'A gambler—and worse—who has sorely fleeced poor Hew! But I shall amply re-imburse him, as it was by my old-fashioned folly our unlucky guest came here. How I shall be able to receive him at dinner to-day I scarcely know, for now I consider his presence in Eaglescraig an insult. You may have been foolish—girlish, Mary; but I know that you won't further vex your old grand-uncle, who loves you so, but will sedulously avoid or shun this person, Falconer, during the few hours he is under our roof: and when he leaves it let his existence be to you as a thing of the past—as that of the dead—but the dead who are forgotten!'

And with this cruel advice, which was all the more cruel and impressive from being coolly, calmly, and deliberately given, the general rose and quitted the library, leaving Mary in a flood of tears and quite overwhelmed with dismay; not at the invectives bestowed upon Falconer, as she knew their source and true value, but at the hostility so suddenly developed by Sir Piers, and the long term of domestic misery she saw before her in the future.

But, as indignation swelled in her heart against Hew, she dried her tears and gathered a courage from her growing anger. Yet she drew her breath with difficulty, and pressed a hand upon her side as if a pang of pain was there.

Unaware of all this scene, Falconer, even in the face of his approaching departure, was chatting away gaily with Annabelle Erroll, and having the full assurance of Mary's love, seemed to tread on air, and feel emotions only of gratitude and joy. He

was as sure that Mary was not a girl to love lightly as he was sure that she had given her whole heart to him, despite the fiat, the 'general order' of Sir Piers, that was to assign her as a bride to Hew Montgomerie.

When the little circle assembled for dinner, the last of which he was to partake in Eaglescraig, Cecil became suddenly and painfully sensible that some change had come over all present, save Miss Erroll.

Though all were scrupulously polite, their old cordiality seemed to have evaporated!

Hew was colder than ever; not that Cecil Falconer cared much for that, but he felt that the usually chatty and genial Sir Piers was cold in manner too, and haughty and monosyllabic, for a time; and Cecil recalled the cordial welcome of his first night in that hospitable mansion, when his old host insisted on escorting him to 'his quarters,' as he called his room, singing his old Indian song about 'half-batta' as they went. He felt the change keenly, and angrily too, all the more that he failed to understand it.

'What the deuce does the general suspect—what does he know?' thought Cecil, whose own suspicions certainly pointed towards Hew; but he and Mary were without the means of comparing notes together, or even of taking of each other the tender farewell they would have wished.

At table—with the memory of all that had passed in the library—she was nervous, silent and reserved, while she kept listening to the voice and looking furtively in the eyes that as secretly sought hers—the voice and eyes she had been bidden to forget as those of 'the forgotten dead.'

When the ladies withdrew, the general, who was the soul of hospitality when pushing the decanters round—for he was vain of his clarets, Chateau Lafitte, Haut Brion, and Margaux—felt half inclined to relax and relent at times. Could Hew have been mistaken in that diabolical story about the cards? But if so, he was not mistaken on the subject of Falconer's admiration of his intended wife; and though such was utterly

adverse to the wish of Sir Piers, he felt that he could forgive it, especially as, like Mrs. Garth, he felt that in the look and air, the expression of face, and bearing of Cecil Falconer, there was an undefinable something that brought painfully back to memory the face of another; and yet, between the two faces, that of his dead son—for his it was—and the face of Falconer, there was no especial likeness.

'Had poor Piers been living now,' thought the general, 'he would have been nearly fifty years of age, which reminds me that I am getting too old to harbour thoughts of anger now.'

In the drawing-room, Cecil found the piano closed; there was evidently to be no music that evening, nor was he in the mood for it, except in so far that it might have served to cloak a few farewell words to Mary, whom he found occupied at chess with Mrs. Garth, and save that she trembled a little and changed colour at his entrance, she seemed unconscious of his presence, as the slow and silent game proceeded in its tedium: and leaving Sir Piers and Hew deep in some matter of local improvements to be made on a certain farm, he seated himself beside Miss Erroll, on an ottoman, a little way apart.

'And so you indeed go to-morrow?' she observed, for lack of something else to say apparently.

'Inexorably, Miss Erroll,' he replied, with a smile that was no smile at all; 'and after all the happiness I have enjoyed here I shall feel doubly lonely at Dumbarton, as it is most probable that the general may invite my brother officer here to take my place.'

'Mr. Leslie Fotheringhame?' she said in a low voice, while her eyes drooped.

'Yes.'

'What leads you to think so?' she asked, with a little agitation of manner that Cecil could not fail to detect.

'He has once or twice said such was his intention.'

Such, indeed, had been the general's wish, but recent events had made him change his mind.

Miss Erroll was a singularly attractive and bright-looking girl

—bright in her manner and blonde beauty. Her fair golden hair rippled back from her broad, low, snowy forehead; and she had a tender, rosebudlike mouth, and very lovely eyes. In the full preoccupation of his thoughts with Mary, Cecil Falconer had not been quite conscious that on several occasions Miss Erroll had led him to talk of his solitary friend at Dumbarton, Leslie Fotheringhame, as if she had some interest in him; and also, that if he attempted to question her on the subject, she skilfully or nervously changed it, or evaded it.

'You know Fotheringhame, it would seem?' he asked.

'I do—or *did*, rather,' she replied, in a low voice.

This implied that there had been a coolness, a quarrel, or a dropping of acquaintance somehow.

'He was not always in the Cameronians,' said Falconer.

'I am aware of that.'

'Perhaps you knew him when in his former regiment?'

'When in his former regiment—yes,' she replied, repeating his words, as if afraid to trust herself to any of her own. 'How long will Mary puzzle over her king?—she is quite checkmated!' she said with a forced laugh, as she moved towards the chess-table, to conceal from Falconer an expression of genuine pain that shot over her soft, fair face.

He noticed now an unmistakable agitation of manner and sudden sadness of eye and tone in Annabelle Erroll; and though he almost immediately forgot this amid the anxiety of his own love-affair, he remembered it all at a future time.

The brief evening that followed the late and fashionable dinner-hour passed rapidly—too rapidly for Cecil; yet heavily withal. The evening was so unlike its predecessors, for the once pleasant circle seemed entirely changed. How Falconer's heart would have swollen with just rage had he known the reason why!

And this was his last night at Eaglescraig; it seemed as if he was looking on everything there for the last time, Mary's pale face included, and the time came at last when he had to say to her:

'Good-night, and good-bye, Miss Montgomerie.'

Yet Fate was not so cruel as to make them part thus, for through a skilful manœuvre executed by Miss Erroll—in compelling Hew to hold a folio book of Indian photographs while the general explained to her something therein—as Mary gave Cecil her hand, 'her soft, white virgin hand, that had never touched aught to soil or harden it,' he whispered hurriedly, and unheard by all save her:

'Good-bye. Oh, my darling, my own Mary! How am I to live without you, how make the time pass till we meet again—if ever?'

And eye conveyed to eye and heart a world that was alike unsaid and unseen.

Courtesy compelled him to shake the damp, limp hand of Hew, and the shifty eyes of the latter looked radiant with malevolence and triumph.

Grey dawn was breaking, and save Mr. Tunley, the butler, and a sleepy valet, all the household were sunk in slumber, when Falconer, after an almost sleepless night, and feeling as if it must be some other person and not himself that was about to depart, got into the dog-cart with his portmanteau and gun-case.

A cold, chilly morning, the last day of January. The crocus formed a golden band along the parterres of the terrace; a few snow-flakes came aslant the dull grey sky, and the robin redbreast, his little heart filled at least with hope, twittered and sung on the bare spray, where the first buds of spring would soon be bursting. All around the landscape looked dank and barren and dreary—unusually so it seemed to Cecil's eye.

Pate Pastern, a groom, drove the dog-cart. Hew had again flatly declined to do so, saying overnight to Sir Piers that he 'didn't care to drive a fellow like Falconer, a fellow so devilish sharp at cards, and all that sort of thing, you know;' and the general had said approvingly:

'Of course not, of course not, my dear boy.'

Cecil's mind was a prey to great bitterness in the conviction that he was leaving Eaglescraig, as it seemed for ever, and with no definite plans, views, or hopes for the future. Was all this new love, this new joy, to pass out of his life and out of hers as suddenly as it had come to them?

It seemed so!

He had, he thought, done wrong in winning the heart of Mary Montgomerie without the permission of her proud old guardian and kinsman: but now he had little compunction for having done so, as that permission would never have been accorded to him, and he felt that his departure seemed a welcome move to all but her—a departure permitted to pass coldly, and without even a well-bred expression of regret.

A farewell glance at the stately modern villa, and the grim old keep that towered behind it, showed him their walls all reddened in the early morning sun; the window-blinds close drawn, all closed as yet, save one. His heart told him it was that of Mary's room. The sash remained, of course, unlifted, but the blue silk curtain was festooned back, and every pulse vibrated within him when he saw the wave of a white handkerchief, just as the dog-cart went bowling down the wooded avenue towards the highway.

It was Mary's farewell to him.

Would the strains of the sweet old story, that never tires, come to their ears again? How would it all end between him and Mary Montgomerie, or was it ended *now?*

CHAPTER XIII.

IN SHADOW LAND.

'I AM truly glad for Hew's sake, and for Mary's sake, that he has gone—gone ere it was too late!' thought Sir Piers, as he sat in his easy-chair in the library that afternoon, when nothing remained of Cecil Falconer at Eaglescraig but an aching pain

in Mary's heart, and in the avenue the ruts of the wheels that had borne him away.

His recent conversation with Hew about the dread of a *mésalliance* made the old baronet's mind revert—as it too often did, bitterly and unavailingly—to another *mésalliance* in his family, which nearly brought ruin—for such in the vanity of his soul he deemed disgrace—upon the Montgomeries of Eaglescraig, who had for ages been a power in the bailiwick of Cunninghame.

'It seems a pity that we should disturb the stagnant waters of that Dead Lake which men call the Past,' says Miss Braddon; but Sir Piers was rather prone to do so; and now, as he sat gazing into the red, clear, burning embers, they seemed to take divers shapes and forms, quaint and curious pictures, of which, in reality, he saw little, for his thoughts were treading upon each other fast, and in his dreamy yet steadfast gaze there was a fixed, a far-off look—a look in Shadow land.

A childless old man, he was thinking of what was now, and all that might have been, but for his own stubborn will and pride of heart.

Some five-and-twenty years before this time he had a son who had been the pride of that heart, and valued all the more as being the only child of a young and beautiful wife, after whose death he had never married again, but sought relief from thought amid the wars of British India.

From his infancy young Piers had been petted in every way, and was in some respects the spoiled child of the household. He grew up a bright and handsome lad, full of intelligence and enthusiasm for music and painting; but to dabble in these, even as an amateur, Sir Piers deemed unworthy of his family, so in due time he had his son gazetted to the Cameronians, then in garrison at Gibraltar.

During the unhealthy season, which lasts there from July to November, when the east winds come surcharged with moisture, young Piers was seized with fever, and obtaining leave of absence,

went to travel in Italy, and his letters that came from thence to Eaglescraig, detailing his adventures and journeys up Calabrian mountains and through defiles in the Abruzzi, all indicative of returning health and strength, filled the heart of his father with joy, as his son, the heir of his house and name, was the veritable apple of his eye.

His letters from Rome teemed with his enthusiasm about the objects of history, the ruins of the past, and his ecstasies over the treasures of the innumerable *studii* of painting and sculpture; and then came much about a painter whose acquaintance he had made at the Academy of San Luca, and whose daughter was one of the most beautiful girls and accomplished musicians in that city of pilgrimage to all lovers of art.

After this Sir Piers grew painfully and suspiciously conscious of the fact that his son's correspondence became irregular, his epistles constrained and brief, while more than one incidental reference to the artist's handsome daughter caused alarm in the parental heart, all the more as young Piers had said that her father, 'though a man of humble origin, was an emperor among artists.'

'Piers,' said the baronet to his confidential friend and local factotum, John Balderstone, 'refers to this girl oftener than I quite relish or like; and his letters are vague and odd as—if—as if—he had something to conceal. I wish he were back to his regiment at Gibraltar.'

'Young men *will* be young men,' replied the other; 'the girl may have picked up some pretty tricks of foreign manners, and thus interested him.'

'There are four months of his leave to run; surely he will not spend them all among these painter-fellows in Rome?' said the baronet, grimly.

For one moment, however, an idea of what was really the case never entered the haughty mind of Sir Piers Montgomerie. He only feared an entanglement—as a subaltern, he had often been in such scrapes himself—but nothing *more!*

And now a month elapsed without any letter from Rome, and

genuine anxiety filled the mind of Sir Piers, whom a temporary illness confined at Eaglescraig, and prevented from coming swoop down upon his son in the Eternal City, and seeing how 'matters were' for himself.

At that very time there arrived at a country hotel, within a few miles of Eaglescraig, a young married pair, with a valet and a little French soubrette. Both were singularly handsome—the lady, indeed, was a very beautiful girl with minute and delicate features, dark eyes and rich brown hair; and in her husband, whose face and figure were alike striking, but for the ample beard he now wore, the people of the hotel would have had little trouble in recognising young Piers Montgomerie, for he it was, with his bride, the penniless daughter of 'the emperor among artists!'

He was one who could scarcely fail to make himself agreeable to all women, as he excelled in that half-flirting manner which some young men can cultivate with skill; and borne away by a great love for the girl on one hand, and dreading his father's opposition on the other, he had married her clandestinely, and had now brought her with him to Scotland, trusting that her beauty, sweetness, grace and virtue would open the heart of his father to them both, and pardon the fact of his having had, as he would have phrased it, a 'stolen march made upon him.'

The homeward journey had been but a portion of their honeymoon tour, and safe in her young husband's love, the girl seemed to see only a brilliant and happy, if somewhat vague, future. Aware of his father's temper, spirit, and infatuated pride of family, young Piers was not without some genuine anxiety as to the result, when the issue of his rashness seemed so close at hand.

'If your father is so proud as you say, Piers,' said the young wife—still a bride—as she nestled her sweet face in his neck, and his arm went caressingly round her, 'and if he will not forgive the *mésalliance* you have made with poor me——'

'Well, my darling, what then?'

'You may repent it,' said she, her dark eyes filling with tears, and her voice trembling with anxiety.

'Never, my own little wife—never! and by this time to-morrow I hope to see you taking your place at his table, as the future mistress of Eaglescraig; though long may the time be ere you are so, for my father is a dear old fellow—twice my age, at all events!'

The girl sighed softly, and hoped that all might be as they wished it.

'Welcome back, my boy!' exclaimed Sir Piers next day, when his son appeared (but alone) at Eaglescraig; 'why have you been so long in writing me? Why do you come thus suddenly? and *where* is your baggage? But how well you are looking; and, by Jove, you have a beard like a Brahmin!'

'I have a long story to tell you, sir, about all my adventures; one in particular, that may take some time to tell——'

'Then keep it till after dinner; let us have it with the Château Margaux,' said Sir Piers, laughing; and being timidly willing to delay till the last moment the revelation that was *inevitable*, his son—even with the sweet face of her who, at that moment, was alone in his memory—was glad of the little reprieve.

Anxious to make a good impression, he made a more than usually careful toilette in his own old and familiar room; but when he took his seat at table, the presence of Tunley and the servants, and also of John Balderstone, who had dropped in on business, and whom the baronet had pressed to remain, precluded all reference to his secret for a time, till the cloth was removed, the dessert laid, the decanters ranged in rank entire before the host, and Tunley was told he might withdraw till rung for.

'And now for your story, Piers,' said the elder Montgomerie; 'the claret stands with you.'

'I must first drink to you, and congratulate you on your promotion,' replied his son.

'Yes, I am full colonel now, Piers, and may fairly hope to be a lieutenant-general some of these days. But now for the

story,' he repeated uneasily; 'I suppose John Balderstone may hear it?'

'Of course, sir,' said Piers, coughing nervously, and twice draining his large green claret-glass to gain time, while he felt that his colour came and went, and his father's keen eyes were fixed upon him with equal scrutiny and affection.

Young Piers glanced at the stately table, with its massive plate, glittering crystal, rich wines and luxuriant fruit, and thinking with joy of her who would be the presiding goddess there to-morrow, told his narrative in a manly and honest manner, yet not without some trepidation of tone, while his father sat bolt upright in his chair, staring at him with a face expressive of rage, incredulity, and absolute grief, as if he felt that his only son and heir had gone mad. Worthy John Balderstone also looked scared and bewildered.

'And now, sir,' continued the son, despite the terrible frown that deepened on his father's face, 'I have told you all, except my darling's name.'

'Her name be ——! what is her name to me? Zounds, sir! I don't want to hear it—the daughter of a beggarly painter—an adventuress—to become in time Lady Montgomerie of Eaglescraig! No, sir, no; damme, I'll break the entail; I'll—I'll——'

Sir Piers for a few moments was literally choking with rage.

'That my wife is poor and nameless, according to your mode of thinking, father, is no fault of hers; her beauty is great, her goodness and accomplishments are rarely surpassed, and surely you will forgive us, we love each other so?' urged young Piers; and as he spoke his heart was in his voice, and his very soul seemed welling out of his fine dark eyes.

'May the moment that I forgive you and her be my last on earth!' thundered Sir Piers, smiting the table with his clenched hand; 'forgive you—not if I lived for a thousand years! Away—away! quit my sight, and never let me see your face again!'

And literally he began to tutor himself to hate his son as he had idolised him before.

The latter rose from his chair; his handsome face seemed as if petrified—turned to stone, and with the colour of stone, his nether lip began to quiver painfully, for he too had a heart of fiery pride.

Sir Piers rang the bell so furiously that he nearly rent the wires.

'What are you about to do, sir?' asked his son.

'I am about to expel you from this house for ever!' replied Sir Piers. 'Order the waggonette which brought Mr. Montgomerie from his hotel round from the stables instantly,' he added to the astonished Tunley, whom the fierce summons—the bell was vibrating still—had brought up like a genius of the lamp; 'never again is he to set foot in the house which he has disgraced!'

In vain did worthy John Balderstone attempt to act the peace-maker; he was silenced by an imperious wave of the hand.

'This vile adventuress, for I am sure she is such, shall not quite gain her ends. I shall break the entail, if I can!' exclaimed Sir Piers, with growing exasperation; 'by the God that hears me, I will!'

'Father, see her once—only once—ere you judge her so cruelly! And, oh! let us not part thus! One day you may repent it,' urged his son piteously, and yet not without some anger in his heart.

'Repent it? never!' replied his father, with a wild and bitter laugh. 'Now then, Tunley, *is* that waggonette at the door?'

'Yes, sir,' replied the butler, again appearing, and very much scared.

'Go!' said Sir Piers to his son; 'as God is our judge, here for ever ends all between us!'

He turned and left the room by one door, while his son quitted it by another, and from that moment the father and son met no more. The latter's allowance was cut off; he got into debt, sold his commission, and with his young wife eventually

disappeared. Mr. Balderstone was supposed to be cognisant of his movements for a time under a false name; however, the general never inquired, and after a year or so all traces of him were lost.

Proud of his ancient race, incapable personally of a dishonourable thought or guilty plan, his son's rash marriage, without his consent, and with an obscure girl, filled his heart with a species of black fury, and gave his face a look of repellent pride that was long its settled expression.

The fate of Piers became a kind of mystery—hidden; though it is the fate of things in this world that, as a general rule, nothing is hid for ever.

There came a night which the general never forgot! It was the night of an event which he related only to John Balderstone and one or two others, confidential friends, who were now no longer in the land of the living.

On the night referred to, the lonely general, then creeping up the vale of years, was seated in the library, lingering over his last glass of grog, and gazing, as we last left him, into the glowing embers; his thoughts wandered away from present things to the past in spite of himself. He reviewed the things of old—forgotten sayings and doings in camp and quarters, in the field and the Indian jungle; the faces and the voices of the distant and the dead came back to him, and among them, more powerfully than usual, the face and voice of his lost son, Piers.

There was no sound in the room but the steady and monotonous ticking of a great antique clock on the black marble mantelpiece, and the snoring of a Highland staghound stretched upon a deerskin before the fire, unless we add that the night wind moaned shudderingly through a coppice of red-stemmed Scottish firs, and the beech-trees swayed drearily in the passing blast.

A sudden sense of some one being near him—something intangible, too—came over him; he seemed to hear a sigh, and brave though he was, his heart felt as if dying within him,

and the hair of his head stood up, or a prickly sensation pervaded all his scalp,

Beside his chair a kind of shadow seemed to form itself, and become, with each pulsation of his pulses, more distinct in outline, till the face and form of his son were before him—the former wasted and pallid, his eyes full of sorrow and reproach. His hands seemed unusually white, wan, and the articulations of the fingers were painfully distinct, as those of one who had been wasted by fever, toil, and want.

A thousand maddening and terrifying thoughts seemed to whirl through the general's brain. He strove to start from his chair, but remained in it as if spell-bound; he strove to cry aloud, but his voice failed him, or the faint sound he did utter seemed unnatural, and filled him with greater fear.

For a moment or two the upbraiding spirit it was, or a creation of his own fevered fancy, stood before him, and then slowly melted away.

Sir Piers started to his feet.

'I have been dreaming,' he said, with a kind of gasping sigh. 'A plague on such dreams and fancies!'

But something seemed to tell him it was *not* a dream, and not a fancy, and he remembered that in the pale and wasted hands of the figure were a sheaf of small brushes such as artists use, and a mahl-stick. Had Piers in his dire necessity betaken himself to art to gain a livelihood?

He sat for some time waiting and watching, in a state of awe, terror, and intense anxiety, for the appearance to return, but it came no more; but from that moment an assurance stole into his heart that his son must be dead—that he perhaps died at that particular moment: and then he began to think, and think, and think again, how hard and pitiless he had been; and his handsome face grew older and more lined, and wrinkles seemed to come where none were formed as yet. He might have said with Balder:

> 'I have lived in the past,
> As by a deathbed, with unwonted love,

And much forgiveness as we bring to those
Who can offend no more.'

So time passed on, and old age came upon him—a childless old age.

His son was gone—he had no doubt of that! He had no nephew, no cousin, or cousin's son, to succeed him in the lands that had been in his family since the wars of Bruce and Wallace—yea, since Norwegian Haco's banner fell on the field of Largs; and he began to fear that his title would become extinct, when, in the 'Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland,' he found that Sir Bernard Burke had assigned a place to a certain Mr. Hew Montgomerie, then broiling in the Indian Civil Service, proving that he was the nearest living relative of the line of Eaglescraig.

His lawyers speedily communicated with that amiable personage, whom we have already introduced to the reader, and thus it is that he came to be resident at Eaglescraig as heir of entail, and to the baronetcy.

The poor old general strove his hardest to like Hew, who also strove sedulously, and pretty skilfully, to keep his many bad qualities secret from him; but often when Sir Piers was in his thoughtful or sad moods, he would ask Mary to sing to him certain old songs that were associated in some way with the long-lost Piers, and as her soft voice went to the old man's heart, and her pretty hands strayed over the piano-keys, she 'soothed him to peace,' as Mrs. Garth was wont to say, 'as the harp of David had soothed King Saul with the holy spell of sweet music;' but it was a spell that always sent the thoughts of Sir Piers to wander in Shadow land.

CHAPTER XIV.

LESLIE FOTHERINGHAME.

'WELCOME back to Dumbarton, where I have been somewhat rather of a hermit since you left it—welcome back to pipeclay

and all the "pomp, pride, and circumstance of glorious war!" The decanter is beside you, and I think there are some prime havannas left in that box. So, now, let us be jolly,' exclaimed Leslie Fotheringhame, as Falconer seated himself in the quarters of the former, a curious-looking, old-fashioned room—the same that had been occupied by the little Queen Mary in her twelfth year (ere she sailed to France, after the battle of Pinkie)—one of the oldest parts of the castle.

Falconer cast himself with an air of weariness into an easy-chair, though his journey from Eaglescraig had not been a very long one.

'What about our fellows, Fotheringhame?' he asked, manipulating a cigar.

'The detachment?'

'Yes.'

'There is not much to report; two fellows are in "the shop" for absence from parade; one in the cells, for being drunk and disorderly; and little Fuddie, the drummer, has cut his stick—or sticks, should I say? Probably finding, as Sterne has it, that "the honour of beating a drum was likely to be its own reward," he has taken French leave and bolted. If caught, we should duck the fellow in the Clyde, but for the seventh clause of the sixth section on "Discipline," which prevents the adoption of punishments in detachments that are at variance with those in use at headquarters.'

Falconer continued to smoke in silence, so Fotheringhame spoke again.

'England expects every man to do his duty—but as cheaply as possible—for next to nothing, in fact; so, after your late surroundings, the luxury of my quarters will fail to impress you as either being useful or ornamental—as a certain poem has it, here are—

> '"Apparatus for washing: a pail and a can,
> Part of an Army List, half of a fan,
> A fawn-coloured glove, a lock of false hair—
> Both highly-prized gifts from some lady fair;

A case of blunt razors, a shako and plume;
A fishing-rod, shot-belt, rifle, and broom;
An invite to dinner, the card of a priest,
A sketch of the colonel described as 'a beast.'"'

While Fotheringhame ran on laughingly thus, Falconer was silent and pre-occupied, or replied only by a faint smile.

Leslie Fotheringhame was a handsome man, but of a different type from Cecil Falconer. He was taller and more squarely built, with deep-set and grave dark-blue eyes, the expression of which generally belied his merry manner; he was dark-haired, with a firm mouth, a clear dark skin and ponderous black moustache. His manner was ever honest, frank, and pleasant; and though his turn of mind was somewhat cynical—as if he had met with some disappointment in life—his face at times wore a smile that lit it up like a sunbeam.

Though junior to Cecil Falconer in the regiment, he was his senior by some years; for he had once been a captain of Lancers, but sold his troop, no one knew why, and afterwards obtained a non-purchase commission in the Cameronians. He was also greatly Cecil's senior in experience. He was wont to boast that he had, by a fluke, escaped the perilous meshes of matrimony, though the mess rather opined that he had been disappointed, 'thrown over,' by some girl, though none exactly knew the story.

'What is doing at headquarters?' asked Falconer.

'Birkie of that Ilk has sent in his papers.'

'Birkie—why?'

'Lost a pot of money on a hurdle-race at Streatham—it's a step in the regiment; but everyone is very sorry for poor Birkie. Acharn has got into a scrape with a widow, whose husband suddenly turned up, so he has gone on leave, to be out of the way, and Freeport too.'

'Freeport—what was Dick up to?'

'He proposed to three sisters in one night—all the daughters of a commandant of one of those confounded brigade depôts,

and hearing that the adjutant might be sent for his sword, Dick was off like a bird by an early train for London. But we all know that Dick has an engagement-ring with a blue stone, which he gives to some girl everywhere, yet contrives to get back in a lover's quarrel when the route comes.'

To Fotheringhame it was apparent that his friend had come back to Dumbarton in a somewhat taciturn mood—cloudy in face and abstracted in manner.

'What the dickens has happened?' thought he.

'Was our colonel—the old general—kind?' he asked.

'Very,' was the curt reply.

'And the ladies—kinder still, I suppose?' hazarded Fotheringhame, lying back in his chair and shooting concentric rings of tobacco-smoke upward. 'No answer—eh? Now, apropos of the subject of your remarkable letter, I hope that you have left Eaglescraig without committing yourself?'

'I played no more with that fellow Hew.'

'I am not thinking of Hew.'

'Committing myself—how?'

'By a proposal.'

'What had I to offer a girl so rich as Mary Montgomerie—an heiress, in fact?'

'All that a girl wants in a husband, I suppose—a deuced good-looking and presentable fellow of his inches.'

'I could never sink to be a dependent on my wife, Leslie. Had Mary been penniless——'

'Oh, come—we have got the length of calling her Mary, have we?'

'Had she been so, I might not have shrunk from asking her to share my poverty—for such it is; but her fortune is an impassable barrier between us—and I would to heaven that I had never set foot in Eaglescraig!'

'This is rather quixotic,' said Fotheringhame, sipping his brandy and water, and humming—

'"'Tis madness to remember—'twere better to forget."'

'Moreover, if she marries without her guardian's consent, "then in that case," as the will has it, her money passes from her.'

'You seem to have had all the details through hand,' said Fotheringhame drily.

'Not with her, at all events.'

'And she is attractive?'

'Attractive is not the word—she is downright lovely, and good as she is lovely! But her guardian, the general, has decided on plans for her future.'

'A peerage?'

'Not at all. He resolves that she shall marry the cub called Hew Montgomerie, who is the heir of entail—a kind of distant cousin.'

'Does—Mary affect him?' asked Fotheringhame, with a quizzical smile.

'Not at all! But I cannot tell you how much she has bewitched me.'

'Aware all the while of the plan in store for her.'

'I know what a sceptic you are about women, Leslie; but her face is ever before me, by day and night. I can see it now looking at me, out of that blank barrack wall, as plainly as I see yours. She has indeed bewitched me!'

Fotheringhame looked at the wall indicated, shrugged his shoulders, and said, with a provoking laugh:

'I can't help thinking, old fellow, that the girl has been amusing herself with you, from the details you give me, and that a flirtation was all she wanted.'

'Fotheringhame!'

'Don't get excited. I am sure that, like other dear creatures,

'Her feet are so very little,
Her hands are so very white;
Her jewels are so very heavy,
Her head so very light;
Her colour is made of cosmetics,
Though this she never will own;
Her body's made mostly of cotton,
Her heart is made wholly of stone.'

'This may apply to some goddess of yours,' said Falconer, becoming seriously ruffled; 'but as for me——'

'There will be no more larks or rows,' continued Fotheringhame, laughing; 'no more chance medley flirtations at picnics or lawn-tennis, or even in the conservatory; our mind, or what is left of it, must run only on one ideal, and on presents of dainty gloves for lovely little hands, books and bouquets, chains, lockets, and bracelets, pressure of the taper fingers, perhaps even a chaste kiss, as Byron has it——'

'By Jove, Leslie, how you *can* gabble!' said Falconer, but without a smile, for something peculiarly uncomfortable and damping in the closing details of his visit to Eaglescraig haunted him.

Perceiving this, Fotheringhame's banter ceased, and after a pause he said:

'Pardon me, Cecil, if my jokes annoy you; but if she does not wish to marry this fellow Hew, why should she?'

'Why?'

'Yes; no power can compel her. The day is passed when girls can be married against their will, except in novels. There may be, I am aware, a mild system of domestic pressure, a steady and persevering domestic tyranny, quite as mischievous in the end, sometimes, as the brute force of the terrible old baron or stern parent of the Middle Ages; and I have even known more than one case in which the feeble opposition of a girl has been foiled under the powerful home-current, as it flowed on and bore her away with it.'

'By Jove, Leslie, you *are* a Job's comforter! And now, by-the-bye, there is another girl at Eaglescraig of whom I have not yet spoken—a lady on a visit.'

'And your mind was divided between them?'

'Not at all, though the beauty and style of Annabelle Erroll are indescribable.'

'*Who* did you say?' exclaimed Leslie Fotheringhame, as his voice and face changed curiously, he took the cigar from his lips and sat bolt upright in his chair.

'Annabelle Erroll; she knows *you*, by the way, and I hope the general will, in turn, invite you to Eaglescraig.'

'I hope not,' said Fotheringhame sadly and fervently; 'by Jove, I hope not!'

'Why?'

'Why? Because I would not go under any circumstances or pressure, from what you tell me.'

'As to what or whom? Hew Montgomerie?'

'Hew be hanged! No.'

'Who then?'

'Annabelle Erroll,' said Fotheringhame, uttering the name sadly, softly, and with unction.

'So thereby hangs a tale.'

'Yes, old fellow—a devil of a tale I would rather not unfold.'

'Then you have had your little weakness too?'

'Of course; I've been in love like other—fools; who has not?'

Cecil Falconer, however, was too full of his own affair to ponder long over the mysterious intimacy that existed, or had existed, between Annabelle Erroll and Leslie Fotheringhame.

CHAPTER XV.

SEPARATED.

THOUGH grievously disappointed that his late guest should have proved the gamester Hew described him to be, and not ill-pleased to have a rival of the latter at a distance from Eaglescraig, Sir Piers, to do him justice, in the kindness of his heart, missed his friend, the genial young officer, who had been so patient a listener to those dreary Indian reminiscences, over which Hew openly groaned and secretly swore.

Mrs. Garth and Annabelle Erroll missed him for his musical accomplishments and conversational qualities, and poor Mary

missed him more than all, while her aversion to Hew became more undisguised than ever, and he spitefully retorted by saying more than once in her hearing that 'a deuced good lesson had been taught Sir Piers never again to invite, without a due and accredited introduction, any chance-medley fellow to Eaglescraig.'

Her manner to his heir at last drew upon her the animadversion of Sir Piers.

'My dear girl,' said he to her one day, 'I must remonstrate with you, as the betrothed wife of Hew.'

'Betrothed! by whom?' asked Mary, with mingled gravity and anger.

'By me, my darling; as such, I say, you owe him some duty, and some respect, and a deference to his opinions. School yourself to love him properly in the time to come, and not distress your poor old grand-uncle and guardian, who loves you so well for your dead parents' sake.'

'I do not and cannot love him,' said the girl wearily.

'Not now, you think; but in time, Mary, in the good time to come,' he continued, stroking her rich, dark hair caressingly, as if she were yet a little child; and when he adopted a pleading tone and manner, rather than those of authority and command, she felt a deeper emotion of pain and annoyance.

'There is no necessity for having romantic notions, or being desperately fond of your intended husband. The notions and the love will come in due time after marriage,' said the old man, who had well-nigh forgotten all about his own early love and marriage, which had come to pass so long ago. 'You have wealth, Mary.'

'What is wealth, if linked with unhappiness?'

'Hew will make you a good husband; if he did not—if he did not!' and the general paused, and grasping the knob of his arm-chair, looked unutterable things at the idea of such a contingency. 'As I have said a hundred times since he came from India, with your fortune added to what I shall leave—all going to Hew as heir of entail—the future baronet of Eagles-

craig will, in wealth, be second to none, richer by far than half the peerage; and marry you cannot without my permission.'

'But to marry when one cannot love is—is——'

'What, girl?' asked Sir Piers peevishly, for he had not again referred to the suspected fancy for Cecil Falconer, though his mind was full of it.

'Falsehood and dishonesty, rank injustice,-and shameful!'

'Well—anything more?' he continued angrily.

'Yes—destruction of soul and body, perhaps.'

'Mary, you do not look beyond the present,' said Sir Piers, with growing sternness, to find his pet scheme so vigorously opposed; 'hence it is my imperative duty to do that for you, and with a firm will and resolute hand to scheme out a happy future.'

'How miserably had he schemed out the future of his poor dead son!' thought Mrs. Garth, as she led Mary away in tears and anger.

Meanwhile, if Hew looked upon himself as the future lord and master of Mary Montgomerie and her thousands, still more surely did he look upon himself as the future laird, lord, and Master of Eaglescraig and all that appertained thereto; and while impatiently looking forward to the day of his succession, gave himself, unknown to Sir Piers, such airs with old and valued adherents, such as John Balderstone the factor, Tunley the aged butler, whose taste in wine he scouted; Pate Pastern the head groom, who was cognisant of some of his tricks on the turf; old Sandy Swanshott the head keeper, with even Mrs. Garth and others, that, certes, he won anything but golden opinions from all!

Between him and John Balderstone there was a species of smouldering feud. The latter loved and revered Sir Piers, and always winced when Hew showed, as he had the coarseness and ill-feeling to do, that he actually prayed for the sudden or premature arrival of the time when he should figure as Sir Hew Montgomerie; premature it could scarcely be now, though the hale old man seemed to have years of life in him yet,

Mr. Balderstone was not slow in perceiving how Hew disliked their late visitor, Cecil Falconer, and thus was disposed to vaunt his praises in the mere spirit of opposition.

'I can't perceive the fellow's merits in any way,' growled Hew with an oath, as they entered the smoking-room one evening.

'That I can very well believe,' replied the old gentleman drily.

'How—why?' demanded Hew, suspecting something in his tone.

'Plainly, then, to do so would argue the existence of what you do not possess.'

'What is that—perception?'

'No.'

'What then?'

'Some refinement of taste,' replied Mr. Balderstone, his dark grey eyes beaming as he made a home-thrust, for which Hew quickly revenged himself in a fashion of his own, causing the portly Mr. Balderstone, as he seated himself, to spring up with a malediction.

'What the devil is the row?' asked Hew.

'Only this, sir, that you have placed a pair of sharp jack-spurs upon the chair you so politely accorded me!'

'And you have a sanguinary sense of sitting down on the rowels—eh?' said Hew, laughing heartily, and not even attempting an apology, while his shifty eyes now beamed with delight.

'I presume these spurs are a present to you, from your friend Mr. Welsher Twigg, the gentleman rider, whose peculiar riding so favoured you at Ayr and York last year,' said Mr. Balderstone, with some contempt of manner, while Hew's parti-coloured eyes now gleamed with rage, for it was averred on the turf, that, bribed by him, the rider in question, when pretending to give a horse a bucket of water, daubed his nostrils with blood, to make people believe the animal had broken a blood-vessel, and had secretly loosened the nails in the shoes of another, at a hurdle-race, to prevent him winning.

As these black rumours had never reached the ear of Sir Piers, Mr. Balderstone felt that he had 'scored one' by the taunt; but in a time to come, and by both unforeseen then, he was to run up a terrible and crushing score against Hew Montgomerie, with a result that neither could have imagined.

Slowly passed the days now with Mary. The spacious house was full of new guests, and pleasant ones too, but it seemed dull and dreary, since *he* was no longer there. His place was vacant. The click of balls came from the billiard-room, and the sound of merry voices, but his was no longer there, or at her piano now. All seemed changed to Mary. Sir Piers never adverted to his visit, his name, or his existence; and scarcely ever to the old and invariable topic of the Cameronians.

Why was this? Did he suspect their secret, or was Hew the spirit of evil? She could not doubt that; and her sympathetic friend Annabelle Erroll, who was a close observer of affairs, and had all Mary's confidence, thought so too.

But Annabelle Erroll had thoughts that were peculiarly her own, over the departure of Cecil Falconer.

'He has gone from me to Leslie,' she said to herself; 'to Leslie Fotheringhame, to tell him that he has spent a whole month with me—a month in my society, and I have given no sign that Leslie's existence was ever aught to me—at least, I hope so—and yet there was a time when I was all the world to him! Yes—yes—it is indeed over and done with, the love that was once ours. Will Leslie ask him how I am looking?' (she glanced at her soft blonde beauty in the mirror). 'Or how I am comporting myself—sadly or merrily?—if I am unchanged from the Annabelle of the time that can come no more?'

For some mysterious reason she had not taken her friend Mary into her confidence at first, when Fotheringhame's name was spoken of; and now she shrunk from doing so, lest she might seem wanting in candour; and, as the love she referred to was 'over and done with,' what mattered it now?

And yet often Mary might have drawn such a confidence from her.

'Oh, Annabelle,' she would sometimes say, 'so quick is fancy, that occasions there are when I see a figure like Cecil's in the distance—the figure of some one else, whose walk or gesture recalls him vividly to me—that I feel something like a sharp pang in my heart.'

As days passed on and became weeks, Mary's movements and manner became languid, and all her old occupations, if not neglected, were pursued with a weary indifference. She had lost interest even in being dressed to perfection, as she had always been, and spent hours in the seclusion of her own room, or exclusively in the society of Annabelle Erroll.

Her eyes lost their clear brilliance and became heavy in expression; her usually gentle and playful manner was changed for petulance and irritability, all signs of where and how her thoughts were—signs which Hew watched with jealous rage, and loving old Sir Piers with unaffected solicitude, mingled with bitterness at Falconer, and at himself for that which he now deemed his own fantastic idea of *camaraderie* and old military hospitality.

'Never again,' he would mutter to himself, 'never again will I play the fool! Hew is right—Hew is right!'

His pet from her orphan childhood, his artless, father-like experience of her, had, until quite recently, prevented him from remarking that she was no longer a baby-faced girl, but a grown woman—a bird that might leave him for another nest—and then a kind of nervous thrill went through his heart, when he thought a love for another might take possession of her; and thus he became doubly anxious to secure her for Hew.

'How pale and ill you look, my darling!' said Mrs. Garth to her, at the close of a day that had seemed a long and dreary one to Mary.

'What matters it?' said she petulantly; 'Cecil cannot see me now,' she added mentally, as her eyes wandered through the window to the wooded walk that led to the grotto—the grotto where Cecil had first told her of his love, and where his lips had touched hers for the first and last time, and the

host of tender recollections that hallowed the place flowed full upon her memory. 'Why are some people sent into this world only to be miserable?' sighed the lovely heiress, while surrounded by every luxury that world could furnish. 'I wonder if we ever lived before and were happy—or if we shall live again, and be happier still! Who can tell—who knows?'

Then tenderly and fondly she recalled the words of Cecil, when he spoke to her of the mysterious sympathy that, in his solitary moments, had seemed to link his soul, or existence, with that of another, and could she doubt now that it was her own?

And with this idea, a tender and loving expression would steal over her delicate *mignonne* face.

'Rouse yourself, my darling,' Mrs. Garth would say, 'ride or drive—read or work.'

'Read—read! I hate books now—I hate crewel-work, music, everything!' she replied, almost snappishly; 'dear old Garthy, I am no longer a schoolgirl, and I never, at any time, was one cut to the Hannah More pattern.'

She had learned from his own lips how Cecil loved her; but now Cecil was gone and never could return, and all her little world seemed sunless and cold—dark and desolate. She was no longer alternately amused and petulant, coquettish and light-hearted, for a settled moodiness had come over her—the gloom of sorrow, not anger; and though no one, not even Annabelle, surprised her in tears, her eyes sometimes bore unmistakable traces of recent weeping.

A wild longing would, at times, come over her to see Cecil again—to hear his voice—to know what he was doing, or with whom he was at that particular moment; but the days passed vaguely and drearily on, while she thought of him, dreamt of him, talked in fancy to him, and wove such romances about him and herself, as only a young girl can weave.

He was not very distant from her after all, and yet he might, so far as their intercourse was concerned, have been at the Antipodes; for no tidings, no news of him, ever came to

Eaglescraig, and at last, to Mary, it began to seem as if the sweet bright chapter in her life, about Cecil Falconer, was utterly ended!

And probably she would never love again, she thought; for that she had given him was the one love of a lifetime.

But the general and Mrs. Garth thought they knew better; and that her ailment was only a girlish fancy, that naturally would pass away and be forgotten.

CHAPTER XVI.

ANNABELLE ERROLL.

Now Leslie Fotheringhame, though disposed at first to be somewhat reticent on the subject of his previous intimacy with Annabelle Erroll, after a time confided their mutual story to Cecil Falconer.

Thrown together as he and the latter were, in that lonely and isolated fort, the whole garrison of which, besides their own detachment, consisted only of a master gunner and a few old pensioners, it was natural that they should have their mutual confidences over their after-dinner cigars, and thus Falconer heard all about it from Fotheringhame.

'You see, old fellow, it came to pass in this way.

'My troop of Lancers were quartered in Perth Barracks, while the head-quarters were stationed at Piershill. I soon tired of all the little gaieties afforded by the Fair City; but the season was summer, and the Tay afforded me endless amusement for fly-fishing and boating; and, as one of my subs was on leave and the other on the sick-list, I was somewhat thrown on my own resources.

'I had a swift light shallop, in which I used to pull daily, when the tide or stream served, from the bridge upward past the wooded slopes of Kinnoull, and away for miles amid the loveliest and most luxuriant sylvan scenery in the world.

'One day the heat was very great, and, ceasing to row, I

lay back in the stern-sheets of my boat, with a cigar between my lips, and let her float, lazily, on the current of the stream, which flowed between its wooded banks deeply, silently, and majestically. On every hand around me were a long series of varied hills covered with picturesque foliage of every shade of green, the vista everywhere terminated by the more remote mountains, the rich tints of which were softened in the blue haze and by the distance.

'At a bend of the river my boat partially grounded, but I felt too lazy to shove off, and lay there under the shadows cast upon the bright stream by the overreaching elms, oaks, and silver birches, among the blended foliage of which the blue doves were cooing, and where the wild violets and jasmine grew close to the water's-edge. On all the river I thought there could be no lovelier spot than this. Save the stillness of its flow, and the hum of the mountain honey-bee among the wild flowers of the wood, in and out of the gueldre-roses and fox-glove-bells, there was no sound in the air, as I lay there in a kind of day-dream, with my arms resting idly on my sculls, till the voice of a girl, singing close by, roused me at once to attention.

'Sweetly she sung, and seemed to give her whole soul and pathos to the song. She thought no ear save her own was within hearing; but for a time the singer remained unseen by me.

"'Love me always—love me ever,'
Said a voice low, sad, and sweet;
'Love me always—love me ever,'
Memory will the words repeat."

'And in truth, Falconer, I give them by an effort of memory now, it is so long since I heard and read them:

"While in fancy still beside me,
Is her fair and graceful form;
And I hear the murmured love-words,
Gushing from her heart so warm.

"From her heart, subdued by sorrow,
In its fond and trusting youth,
Till she trembles lest the morrow
Rob some idol of its—truth?"

'A slight impetus which I gave my boat with one of the sculls, brought me quite suddenly to the very feet of the singer, as she stood on the edge of the stream, embowered among foliage, and shaded by the light aspen-like sprays of the silver birches, regarding me with some surprise, for my boating costume, I dare say, was novel in that quarter, and seeming irresolute as to whether she should retire—any way, advance she could not.

'I saw at a glance that the girl was just at that age which is between childhood and maidenhood, that she was perfectly lady-like, delicate in form and figure, and possessed of rare beauty of the fairest, or blonde type; her hair of the lightest brown, and shot with gold that made it brilliant in the flakes of sunlight that flashed between the trees; her eyes, of dark-grey blue, had brows and lashes so dark as to impart great character to her otherwise soft and *mignonne* face; but you know well who I am describing.

'She had a bunch of wild-flowers in one hand; the other grasped the ribbons of her tiny hat, which she was swinging to and fro, as she had come through the wood bareheaded, and was evidently not far from her home.

'"Pardon me," said I, lifting my cap, "but I am afraid that I am rather a tresspasser here."

'"Not at all, sir; the river is free to everyone."

'"But I have been almost ashore, and is not that presuming too far?" I asked again, only for the pleasure of conversing with her.

'"Oh no," she replied, with a charming smile.

'"But I have disturbed you, I fear."

'"How?"

'"I heard you singing—need I say, how sweetly!"

'"An old song, quoted from some old book, but the melody far surpasses the words."

'"Yes, as sung by your voice," said I gallantly.

'"What a pretty boat yours is! Have you rowed far?"

'"All the way from the bridge."

'"I can only hope to do so," said I, handing her ashore and retaining her little ungloved hand lingeringly in mine; "but I row past here every day, *at the same hour.*"

'"Good-bye," said she, about to turn away.

'"May I ask your name?" said I, cap in hand.

'"Annabelle Erroll."

'"Why do you start so?" she asked laughingly, and, tripping up the bank, vanished among the white stems of the silver birches, leaving her ferns in the boat behind her.

'Start! Well might I do so; for I now discovered that she was my cousin, the daughter of a widowed maternal Aunt Annabelle, with whom my parents had ever been at enmity, about some money quarrel, with her husband, Colonel Erroll—an aunt whom I had never met, and of whose existence I had but a vague idea.

'My cousin she was, and proud, greedy old Uncle Erroll's daughter! I would rather not have heard this; for the girl's rare beauty attracted me powerfully on one hand, while the transmitted stories of the family feud—stories which in boyhood made me regard the colonel and his wife as an ogre and ogress—on the other, had a fatal effect upon me.

'That her mother yet kept up the feud, was evident from the circumstance that she had never mentioned to Annabelle the fact, which she must have known, that I commanded the Lancers at the barrack within a few miles of their own house. Yet to have done so would have served no end; though I thought not of that.

'Would the young girl understand, or accept, my *hint?*

'When, on the following day, I betook me to the bend of the river in my boat, she was not there. I waited long, and reluctantly pulled away with a certain emotion of pique. But, on the *next* day again, at the same hour, I saw her light skirt flitting among the silver birches, and at once crept inshore. I had cut some fresh fern roots for her, in place of those she had forgotten.

'"Ah, how thoughtful and kind of you," she exclaimed, as

she gave me her hand, and allowed me to lead her on board, quite as a matter of course.

'"You will have a little row to-day?" said I.

'"A very tiny one it must be, then; I am so afraid of mamma," she replied; and in another minute we were skimming over the silvery water.

'"Have you mentioned to your mamma your meeting with me?" I inquired.

'"With you—a stranger? Oh, I dare not, Captain Fotheringhame."

'"You know my name, then!"

'"I saw in a newspaper, by the merest chance, that you were a guest of Lord Rothiemay's."

'For certain cogent reasons of my own, I could not help colouring like a great schoolboy at this peer's name, as I had been involved in something closer than a mere flirtation with a daughter of his; but in the present instance, while feeling already inclined to be rather cousinly, I resolved to remain incog. as long as I could. I knew that she would not mention my name at home, and so resolved to abandon myself to the perilous charm of her society during the absence of the Rothiemays in London. I admit freely that I was wrong, selfish in this, and severely was I punished in the end.

'This second day on the river was succeeded by many others, during which I gave myself completely up to the fascination of my new companion, who was so bright, quaint, and *spirituelle*, and full of enthusiasm for music, flowers, scenery, and everything, that she was unlike any other girl I had ever met—more than all, most unlike in style of beauty and manner the stately and patrician daughter of Rothiemay.

'The boat, in the blaze of the sunshine, was drifting with the current; my sculls in the rowlocks rested on my knees; my cigar, the place and time, disposed me for luxurious reverie; and opposite me sat this beautiful girl, her hat beside her, her golden hair and fair face shaded by her parasol, while she sang in a low voice her song, "Love me always—love me ever," her eyes fixed dreamily on the wooded shore the while.

'"Annabelle," said I softly.

'"Who gave you leave to call me by that name?" she asked, pouting.

'"Is it not your name?"

'"Yes, Captain Fotheringhame."

'"And a very pretty one; yet not even pretty enough for you. Why may I not call you by it?"

'"It sounds odd on your lips—already."

'"But not unpleasant, I hope?"

'She laughed, but became silent, and glanced at me shyly under her long lashes—shyly, and yet at times I thought half invitingly, half defiantly, too. Was the girl acting or not? I felt inclined to love her one moment, and simply and selfishly to amuse myself with her the next, heedless, perhaps, of whether the poor girl might learn to love me or not.

'I was a young fellow then, Falconer—save in experience, I am not an old fellow yet—but she was younger still, a very girl, on the borders between childhood and womanhood, the "sweet seventeen" of the inevitable love story. I was playing with fire, and so was she; and in teaching her to love me, I forgot all about an entanglement elsewhere, and gave myself up to the romance and intoxication of the time and the episode. So we met and dreamed on day by day, and she was so brilliantly happy that her soft face at times seemed to be singularly brightened by the very gladness of her heart; for it seems so natural for a young girl to mingle something of idolatry with her first love.

'It did occur to me that our love—hers, at least—was somewhat of the rash and romantic Romeo and Juliet, passionate and unreasoning kind; while she was as young and innocent as I was exacting, and even suspicious that she was perfectly artless. I pondered over the words of Shakespeare: "Love sought is good; but given unsought is better;" and I was cynic, casuist, and egotist enough to doubt this.

'When I kissed her, it seemed each time as if all my soul went out to her with that kiss; and yet—what idiosyncrasy of

the heart was it that made me wish to have that kiss recalled!

'"I seem to have no wish or desire in the world ungratified," she whispered to me, as she nestled her head on my shoulder, while the boat drifted with the current under the tremulous shade of the silver birches, and the Tay rippled placidly past them.

'"You are so happy, Annabelle?"

'"I never thought to be so happy as I am now, Leslie; I could even die with your arms round me! But—but are you satisfied to have such an ignorant little girl for your wife?"

'*Wife!* I had not proposed yet; and the word roused me to a selfish consciousness of the rashness of the whole affair, and so instead of replying I gave her a tender caress, and said:

'"You are too good for me, Annabelle!"

'"I can scarcely believe it—you so handsome, so rich—a captain of Lancers, and all that! Oh, Leslie, God forbid you should ever cease to love me less than you do!"

'This crisis in my river-cruising roused me to think of what I was about; and still more was I roused when at the barracks I found a letter from Lord Rothiemay awaiting me with an invitation to spend a few days at his place. But to leave my troop then was impossible, thus I wrote thanking his lordship, and proposing simply to gallop over on an evening named to dinner, and as I despatched the missive, the face and figure of his daughter Blanche came reproachfully before me.

'I have already referred to an entanglement—it was simply that; though no promise had been given, I deemed myself all but engaged to Blanche Gordon, who, some months before this time, had enchanted and spell-bound me. She was, indeed, a beautiful girl, and is a beautiful woman now, tall, slender, and graceful—a finished creature in every way, and wielding every natural and acquired accomplishment with consummate and yet unapparent art.

'She had given me every reason to believe that the passion with which she had inspired me was reciprocated, and we had only parted with the mutual hope, apparently, of meeting again; hence there seemed an absolute necessity for breaking off my philandering on the river. It is said that a man cannot love two women at once; and yet my heart ached for Annabelle and the grief that was before her.

'By some sophistry I nursed myself into the idea that I, rather than she, was the victim of circumstances; and as I went to the trysting-place for the last time I muttered:

'"'Handsome, rich, and a Lancer,'" she said. "Yes—yes, by Jove! she is not so deuced artless, after all; and the very proposal she made to me was in itself unwomanly."

'*Unwomanly!* I actually had the cruelty to tell her so; and never shall I forget the look of incredulity, grief, dismay, and horror that appeared by turns, and then all blended together, in her beautiful face when I did so; and, already repenting what I had said so capriciously, I would have retracted my words if it were possible to do so.

The phrase went through her loving heart like a bolt of ice, though she seemed to hear it indistinctly.

'"Oh, Leslie!" she gasped, in an accent of desolation such as human lips can utter but once in a lifetime, while her hands became cold and her face grew livid. She bit her lips till the blood came, and clasped her white hands until a ring I had given her marked her tender fingers; and then, remembering it, she tore it off, cast it at my feet, and after giving me one long glance of anguish and reproval, tottered away home; and I, my heart burning with shame, shot my shallop out into the stream, and pulled away from the spot like a madman!

'"She is young, poor girl, and will get over it," thought I; while to nerve myself I conjured up the presence of Blanche Gordon in all her imperial beauty, while, ingrate that I was! she that I had just left possessed and showed all the qualities that win love—and that love had, upon a mere pretence, been coldly and abruptly thrust back upon her heart.

'The black "morrow" of her prophetic song had come indeed, and an idol had been robbed of its truth.

'She was helpless to avenge herself, suffering and so beautiful; so I prayed that God might strengthen her, until some other love consoled her for the loss of mine; and even the thought of that stung me.

'"Yes, yes," thought I, "if so ready to love me, she will with equal facility learn to love another."

'There was no jealousy in the heart of Annabelle, for she knew nothing of any rival; but she was tormented by a sensation of loneliness and utter desolation by day and night, and disappointment was not the least element of that torment. But her time of vengeance was at hand.

'Next day saw me at Rothiemay, and at the feet, if I may say so, of Blanche Gordon, who received me with one of her usual bewitching smiles. My proposal certainly pleased and agitated her, but she told me with considerable confidence and coolness that she was engaged to another, and, indeed, was to be married in three weeks!

'The hollow damsel of fashion had thrown me over for a well-gilded coronet, just as I had thrown over—but coarsely and suspiciously—the girl who only loved me better than I deserved, and whose sweet society I now missed fearfully.

'But I was justly punished, you will say; yet the story does not end here.

'Some weeks after, when family misfortunes came upon me, and I was compelled to sell out—to leave the Lancers—impelled I know not by what emotion or motive, unless it were something like force of habit, and a restless craving, I roamed towards the old trysting-place, beneath the silver birches.

'Things of love and joy seldom repeat themselves, but my heart leaped on seeing Annabelle seated on the bank of the stream, half hidden by the wild-rose trees. Thither, no doubt, to torment her own heart, she had perhaps been in the habit of repairing to dream over the love that would never come again. She seemed lost in thought, and neither saw nor heard my

approach; and I saw the sunlight flashing on the bright, soft, golden hair, amid which my fingers had so often strayed.

'"Annabelle!" said I softly; and she sprang up with a nervous start. "You see I am here again, to crave your pardon and to thank God that life has yet something worth living for—your love, Annabelle!"

'"And yours?" she said disdainfully; then her fortitude gave way, and for a moment she hid her burning face and her hot tears in her white and wasted hands, which, when I attempted to take them, repelled mine.

'"I will try to atone for the past, Annabelle—forgive me," said I humbly.

'"I do forgive you," she replied with sudden calmness, grace, and a bearing of dignity I had never before seen in her; "but you can never be to me what you have been. You were the very idol of my heart, and with all my soul I worshipped you, Leslie; but that is ended now and for ever."

'"If a life of devotion, Annabelle——"

'"Say no more—I will not listen."

'"You decline my love, because ruin has come upon me at the hands of others, and I am compelled to leave the Lancers?"

'Her eyes flashed, yet not with anger, and her bosom heaved, as she replied:

'"I grieve for what you say; and God knows it is not so—but for the manner in which you reproached me with *unwomanly* conduct, that roused my proper pride. I did love you tenderly, purely, passionately, then; but in repelling you, my conduct at least is womanly now. Farewell then, for ever; we leave this place to-morrow."

'"For where?"

'"That can be a matter of no interest to you, Captain Fotheringhame," she replied, turning to retire.

'"Do not let us part thus, Annabelle. It is for your sake as much as my own that I sue thus."

'She crested up her little head haughtily.

'"Believe in my love," I urged.

'"I neither believe in it, nor want it—now at least."

'"How pitiless you are!" I exclaimed.

'"Just as you were; so to part is best for us both. I once dreamt of being only too happy; I am sadly awake now."

'Our eyes met for the last time: the expression of hers was passionless and decided. I had nothing to hope from her; but I sighed deeply, with sorrow, pique, and even jealousy, as I watched her departing steps and saw the last flutter of her skirt between the stems of the silver birches, and then pulled slowly away from the trysting-place, never to seek it again!

'I can remember yet how the woods and lawns along the river's bank looked dreamily indistinct in the evening haze, as I pulled slowly and sadly homeward.

'Never since, till you spoke of her, have I heard aught of Annabelle Erroll, but I have since had reason to believe that she heard, in time, of my affair with Blanche Gordon.'

So all this story of Leslie Fotheringhame's was the secret so skilfully concealed under the calm exterior of the beautiful blonde whom Cecil Falconer had met at Eaglescraig.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOPES AND FEARS.

'THAT was the way our affair of the heart came about, and was ended by my pride, vacillation, and suspicion,' said Fotheringhame; 'and now I have little doubt that she is quite aware that I—the Lancer lover—was her cousin, though I never told her so.'

'How odd of you to act so!' exclaimed Cecil.

'Odd—I was mad, I think!'

'From her manner and words, I thought that you and she possessed in common some mysterious antecedents.'

'An unpleasant way of putting it,' said Fotheringhame, with a shade of annoyance in his face; 'all that time was one of

gloom to me. When I had to leave the Lancers I shall never forget the shock it gave me—though of course expected—to see the "Army List" without my name in it; nor was I ever satisfied till I saw it there again, as a Cameronian. So you see, Falconer, that with all my general heedlessness of bearing, my life has not been without "its little romance, as most lives have, between the age of teetotum and tobacco," as George Eliot has it.'

'I may yet be the means of relighting this old flame again,' said Falconer; 'though it is said that there is nothing so difficult to revive as an old flirtation.'

'It was no flirtation——'

'Save in so far as you were concerned.'

'Until I lost Annabelle, I never knew how much I loved her, and how dear she was to me.'

'If Annabelle Erroll ever loved you she loves you still.'

'Why do you think so?'

'Because true love never dies,' said Falconer enthusiastically, for his mind was full of Mary's image; 'and I can now recall much that was strange in her mode and manner, if I mentioned you incidentally—of which I thought nothing then, but to which you have now given me a clue.'

'For all that you can tell, Falconer, she may only remember me with hatred, therefore it were better to forget the past and all about it. After confiding the matter to my two other friends —a quiet weed and M. de Cognac—I'll turn in, and so good-night.'

Most uneventfully passed the early days of spring, to Falconer, in the solitary castle of Dumbarton, which shoots up abruptly from a flat level, and stands completely isolated, the most prominent and picturesque object amid the beautiful scenery of the blue and majestic Clyde, into the channel of which it projects—a channel through the clear waters of which, on a calm day, one may see whole forests of luxuriant seaweed, waving fathoms deep below.

Perched in the hollow or rift between the two great volcanic

peaks into which this singular, mitre-shaped rock is cleft—the highest being five hundred and sixty feet in height—the old-fashioned barracks contain accommodation for only about a company of soldiers, and an ancient armoury (among the stores of which is the blade of Wallace's sword, fitted with a new hilt of a later period), and which is still identified as having been the prison of the Scottish Patriot, after his betrayal by the infamous Menteith. The circumstance of his sword having a hilt more modern than the blade, has led to its identity being doubted by those who are ignorant of the fact, that in the accounts of the Lord High Treasurer in 1505, we find mention made of the 'binding of Wallas's sword (in the castle of Dumbarton) with cords of silk and a *new hilt* and plomet (pommel), new skabbard and new belt to the said sword, xxvj sh.'

The entrance to the castle is by a barrier-gate at the foot of the rock and fronting the south east. It is defended by ramparts and guns, and immediately within it are the officers' quarters. A steep flight of stone steps gives access to the barracks, the well, and other batteries; from whence, and especially from Wallace's Seat—the highest peak of this stupendous rock—and the circular Roman tower, or fragment, perchance, of the days when Balclutha was the abode of Roderick Hael 'the Generous,' there is a glorious panorama of scenery: the far expanse of the Clyde, the sylvan vale of the Leven, the vast blue mass of Ben Lomond and the mountains of Arrochar, their peaks sometimes veiled in silvery mist.

On the giddy summit Falconer lingered for many an hour, and fancied he could see, more than twenty miles distant, as the crow flies, the hills that looked down upon Eaglescraig. There, when Fotheringhame was absent on some duty, or pleasure, he smoked many a solitary havanna in solitude, in the evening and the gloaming, conversing in imagination with Mary Montgomerie, with a fond enthusiasm and a passion inflamed by obstacles and opposition, long after the shadows had deepened in the vale of the Leven, and all around beneath the rocks; after the drum had beaten tattoo, and the lights of the

last ocean-bound steamers had faded out beyond the point of Ardmore.

Then he would skilfully torment himself by recalling all that Mrs. Garth, with the best intentions in the world, had said concerning what Sir Piers would be certain to insist upon and carry out—the union of Mary Montgomerie, the heiress, with his own heir of entail; and well Falconer knew how Sir Piers would view his own slender means and want of family rank. And though he hoped much, he could not know how, in the secrecy of her own room, and in the long hours of 'the stilly night,' Mary treasured the memory of the few precious moments spent in the grotto, and thought of him and him only—of the influence he had exerted over her when present, and the memory he had left of himself when gone.

At times there was in his manner a passionate dejection which quite bewildered and provoked the more matter-of-fact Leslie Fotheringhame.

''Pon my soul, old fellow, you're in a bad way,' the latter sometimes said; 'you can't live on this Mary Montgomerie, and nothing but Mary Montgomerie! You must get up a relish for something else when the drum beats for mess, or we shall soon have you on the doctor's list.'

So the days and weeks went by till the middle of March came. Six weeks had elapsed since he left Eaglescraig—six centuries, apparently, as lovers count their time!

The few words so hastily spoken in the grotto were deeply graven in his memory, and graven, too, was the kiss—the unpremeditated kiss—pressed so passionately on her unresisting lips. It seemed to haunt him with joy, for ever and aye.

'If she loves me, as I know she does,' he often thought, 'I am a fool not to carry her off in defiance of her guardian and all the world. Heaven knows, it is not her fortune I value, but of course that charitable world would think otherwise, though it is entirely in the hands of Sir Piers.'

After the impression made upon him at his departure from Eaglescraig, he felt that he could go back there on no pretence

whatever, as no welcome, save from one, would await him, and another invitation would never be accorded. He knew that too well.

Times there were when he threw open his desk, and thought he would write to the general on the subject nearest his heart, at all hazards, and cast himself upon his generosity; and then hope died, and his courage failed, as he remembered his own slender exchequer, his humble rank, apart from his commission, and the general's inordinate pride of birth and value of long descent.

So he dared not write to Eaglescraig, and from thence came no word, no news, or sign.

He remembered how Mary had, with much agitation, interrupted his suggestion that he should tell Sir Piers of his love for her. What did she mean, then, unless it were her dread of the latter's power and influence over her, and his future plans with reference to Hew?

But what would he have thought, what would his emotions have been, and how great his indignation, had he known how, thanks to the malignity and perfidy of that personage, the good old general, a mirror of honour himself, viewed him as a trickster at cards, and a scandal to the uniform he wore! Had Falconer been aware of this circumstance, it would simply have maddened him; but fortunately for himself, and the bones of Mr. Hew Caddish Montgomerie, he knew nothing of it.

He was roused from cogitations such as these by an order which recalled the detachment to headquarters.

'We start for Edinburgh to-morrow, Fotheringhame,' he cried, hurrying into his friend's room.

'Hurrah!' responded the latter, springing up; 'thank heaven we are to quit this dull hole! The scenery, of course, is picturesque, and all that sort of thing, but the picturesque is not in my line. The weekly assemblies and allthe gaieties are on just now in 'Scotia's darling seat,' and the regimental ball will soon be coming off, so, with genuine satisfaction, I hail the order to rejoin at last. Well, it is a jolly change, anyway.'

And as such, Cecil welcomed it too, though it increased the distance between himself and Eaglescraig, and he could little foresee the calamities that awaited him in Edinburgh, and the crisis that would come in his affairs.

The departure of the detachment was not so duly chronicled in the local prints as its arrival had been; thus Mary knew nothing of Falconer's movements.

In her own heart she fully conceived herself to be engaged —tacitly engaged—to him, and loved to think she was so. Long engagements are perilous things, even when the pair can see each other at will, or freely correspond, daily or even weekly; tiffs and petty quarrels, even little bitternesses, may come to pass that weaken regard, unless they be, like 'lovers' quarrels, love renewed:' but such a tie as that which existed between Falconer and Mary Montgomerie—never hearing of each other, and debarred all correspondence, having only hope for an anchor, was altogether peculiar in its features.

'She is always sad and weary now, Sir Piers,' said Mrs. Garth one day; 'weary at night, and weary at morning, though she tries to conceal it, or deceive us, by occasional bursts of gaiety.'

'Poor little fool! Her mind is still running on that fellow whom I should never have brought to Eaglescraig. But, with all Hew's faults of temper and so forth, she had better think of him and my wishes, Mrs. Garth; so lead her up to it, for that is our *point d'appui*,' replied the general.

'By Jove!' said the amiable Hew, with one of his ugly grimaces, 'she has no more brains than a hen pheasant, I think, to sit as she does all day long looking like a sick monkey.'

Meanwhile Hew was having no better success with his wooing, a fact which was the more perplexing and even harassing now, as he had resigned his Indian Civil Service appointment, and had no dependence, save upon the purse of Sir Piers, who, as the former grudgingly thought, seemed likely to live for ever; and who hoped, and indeed never doubted, that

when Mary got over her girlish fancy for Cecil Falconer all things would come right in the end; and to change the scene, as the Edinburgh season was then in its flush, Sir Piers removed his entire household from Eaglescraig to his town residence at the west end of the grey metropolis of the north, a few days after Falconer's detachment had quitted the castle of Dumbarton.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CAMERONIANS.

It was the morning after Cecil Falconer's detachment had come in to headquarters over-night.

In the mess-room about a dozen officers in their blue patrol jackets, all more or less good-looking, even handsome young fellows, each and all having a certain joyous and straightforwardness of manner, were at breakfast, singly or in groups, and all greeted Falconer and Fotheringhame warmly, for both were prime favourites with the corps, and there was much shaking of hands and slapping on the back, with 'Welcome, old fellow!' 'How goes it?' and so forth, while an aroma of coffee and deviled bones pervaded the long room which had windows at each end, and where each officer seemed to be economising time, by reading during the meal, with a daily paper or comic serial—*Punch*, of course—propped against his coffee-pot or sugar-basin. All were discussing the repast in haste, as the hour of morning parade was close at hand.

'Here you are again, Falconer and Fotheringhame!' cried one; 'the Damon and Pythias—the David and Jonathan of the Cameronians! The very men we wanted; you have just come in time for the ball committee!'

'Heard the good news, Falconer, old fellow?' asked Dick Freeport.

'No—what is it? One of the three girls you proposed to accepted you?' said Falconer, leisurely tapping an egg.

'Ah, you've heard that story; nothing so stupid. But is it possible you don't know?'

'What?'

'That your name is in the *Gazette;* but here you are, as large as life,' added Freeport, reading aloud: '"Lieutenant Cecil Falconer to be Captain, *vice* Brevet Major Balerno seconded for service on the Staff." I congratulate you.'

'And so do we all!' cried Acharn, a frank, jolly captain, though not yet eight-and-twenty.

'Thanks; I knew not that Balerno was leaving us so soon,' said Falconer, whose first thoughts were of Mary Montgomerie.

'This will rouse your spirits,' resumed Freeport.

'Do they want rousing?'

'Well, you looked rather glum last night. Been spoony on some girl in the West, I suppose?'

'Perhaps I was,' replied Cecil, laughing, with a chivalrous idea that to deny his secret love might prove that he was not worthy of it; 'you know that I varied the tedium of country quarters by a visit to the general—old Sir Piers Montgomerie. But I wish you would fall in love, in downright earnest, yourself, Freeport.'

'What harm have I done you that you should wish me this, Falconer?' asked Dick drily.

'Any fine girls there—at the general's, I mean?' asked a cheeky young sub, of Falconer, who coloured with annoyance, though the boy—a man in his own estimation and that of fast chums, touting tradesmen and money-lenders—was but a boy after all. 'I have heard that his niece, or grand-niece rather, is a stunner. By Jove, he grows absolutely red! Were you writing verses to her eyebrows, and sighing like a furnace, Falconer?'

'You would have sighed like two or three had *you* tried the process,' said Falconer, turning away.

'I do wish you joy, Falconer,' said his friend Fotheringhame, in a low voice; 'and your promotion puts me one step nearer the rank I held when I first knew Annabelle Erroll, and—and —well, played the fool, or worse!'

Cecil thought, would Mary see the *Gazette*? The general, he knew, was certain to do so; and Mrs. Garth too, who read it as regularly as an old Chelsea pensioner; but neither might speak of the event, or deem it was to revive his name at Eaglescraig.

Falconer was somewhat of a pet among the Cameronians. Excellence in all manly sports ever makes a British officer a favourite with his men; thus, as Falconer could keep a wicket well, was also a prime bowler, a good horseman (though he generally owed his mounts to a friend), and could pull a good oar; moreover, as he joined his men in many a match at tennis, football and shinty, he was popular with them, and the eyes of his company seemed to brighten that morning when he came upon parade, and discipline alone repressed the inclination to give him something like a hearty cheer, and for nearly each and all he had some kind word or inquiry—for the officers and men of a regiment should ever feel as one large family. 'Their hopes and fears are similar,' says a writer; 'their turns of exile will come at the same time. Their good and bad quarters will be enjoyed and endured together, and each one shares, in common with the rest, the proud privilege of perchance some day furnishing in his own person that billet to which, the proverb tell us, every bullet is entitled, or of being "wiped out" by sickness in some pestilential clime, or of going down to the bottom of the sea in some rotten old transport. There is something in their order—a distinctiveness, a speciality about it—which makes them cling together, and stand by one another all the faster; for, although mixing freely with the outer world, there is yet an inner one that is entirely their own.'

All troops like Edinburgh, and the national regiments, from their popularity, more than all. The regimental ball was on the tapis when Falconer and his friend rejoined, and nothing else was spoken of in the fortress, or the gay circle outside it; for the corps, as a national and ancient one, was deservedly popular in the Scottish metropolis, the gay season of which is

during the winter, and ends with the opening of summer—a metropolis where the people are all devoted to music and song, and where dancing is a passion with all classes and ages, so that even a baby has been taken from its cradle, that the boast might be fulfilled of *four* generations being on the floor at once.

'Our regimental hop will be *the* ball of the season,' said Freeport; 'so I am glad you have come back, Falconer: the committee could never have done without you. But once it is over, I fear there will be a general flight from town, and we shall be reduced to the melancholy promenade of the Scottish Academy.'

'Is it open?'

'Yes, with the usual kit-kats of local nonentities, and the invariable yearly amount of Bass Rock, Ben Lomond, and the Water of Leith, without which no exhibition of pictures here would be complete.'

So Falconer and Fotheringhame were put on the ball committee, and became forthwith immersed in programmes, invitation lists, and interviews with Herr Von Humstrumm, the German bandmaster, the quarter-master and messman.

The castle of Edinburgh may well be deemed the cradle of the Cameronian Regiment, which received its first 'baptism of fire' amid the fierce and protracted siege endured there by the loyal and gallant Duke of Gordon in 1689. The corps, though now Cameronians but in name, have in that title a glorious inheritance of Scottish and military history, that springs from Richard Cameron's bloody grave in lone and wild Airs Moss, where he fell with Bible and sword in hand, in defence of an 'oppressed Kirk and broken Covenant,' and fell bravely, with his face to the enemy, in July, 1680. As a ballad says:

'Oh, weary, weary was the lot of Scotland's true ones then,
A famine-stricken remnant with scarce the guise of men;
They burrowed, few and lonely, in the chill, dark mountain caves,
For those who once had sheltered them were in their martyr-graves!'

When the landing of William of Orange became known in the West of Scotland, a great body of Cameronians assembled on a holm near the village of Douglas, in Lanarkshire, and, to the number of some thousands, joined the revolted troops who besieged King James's garrison in Edinburgh Castle during the winter of 1688. Out of these, two regiments, now respectively the 25th, and 26th or Cameronians, were constituted in the March and April of the following year. The latter stipulated that their officers should be exclusively men 'such as, in conscience,' they could submit to, as staunch Presbyterians, and great care was taken in the selection of them, while an 'elder' was appointed to every company, so that the whole battalion should be precisely under the moral discipline of a parish, and a Bible formed a part of the necessaries in every private's knapsack. 'It is impossible,' says the Domestic Annalist of Scotland, 'to read the accounts that are given of this Cameronian Regiment without sympathising with the earnestness of purpose, the conscientious scruples and heroic feeling of self-devotion under which it was established, and seeing in them demonstrations of what is highest and best in the Scottish character.'

Their first colonel was James, Earl of Angus, heir of the lordly line of Douglas, who fell at their head in his twenty-second year, at Steinkirk, but a mullet, or five-pointed star, in memory of him, is still one of the badges of the regiment. Their first lieutenant-colonel, Clelland, an accomplished soldier and poet, who had fought under the banner of the Covenant at Drumclog and Bothwell, fell at their head, defending Dunkeld; and their first chaplain was Alexander Shiells, a well-known Scottish divine.

They were clad in red, faced with yellow, the royal colours of Scotland; they wore yellow petticoat-breeches tied below the knee, with monstrous periwigs, and hats of the Monmouth cock, and small Geneva bands at the neck. The captains wore gold-coloured breastplates; those of the lieutenants were of white, and the ensigns of black steel. A proportion of

pikemen and halberdiers were in every company, and the bayonets were still cross-hilted daggers, till the socket-bayonet, first adopted by the 25th, or Edinburgh Regiment, was introduced by its colonel, Maxwell, in Flanders.

The Cameronians fought with valour and distinction in the wars of William and Anne; James, Earl of Stair, commanded them in the year of the Union, and 1720 saw them at Minorca, under Philip Anstruther of that Ilk, three of whose family have been at their head. Under Preston of Valleyfield they fought valiantly in the American War, and how their major, the unfortunate André, perished is well-known to the historical reader. John Lord Elphinstone led them on the plains of Egypt, and Colonel William Maxwell amid the horrors of the retreat to Corunna. In China, under Colonel Mountain, than whom no better or braver officer ever wore scarlet, they won the dragon which adorns their colours, and the scene of their last active service was amid the arid mountains of Abyssinia. And now, as the Cameronians were originally mustered on the holm of Douglas, they are, at this day, linked in brigade with the Lanarkshire Militia.

Though changed in character and impulse, the regiment is 'the Cameronians' still; but its ranks are no longer manned by the sturdy Covenanters—'men who prayed bare-headed as the troopers of Claverhouse aimed at their hearts—prayed a prayer begun on earth and ended in heaven!'

Local and national regard for the corps caused, we have said, a deep interest to be taken in the forthcoming regimental ball; but, while working on the committee therefor, Cecil Falconer could little foresee the effect that festive occasion was to have on his future career.

He felt his hand actually tremble as he addressed the invitation cards, handsomely embossed with the crested sphinx of the regiment, to Eaglescraig, for the general and his family. He knew that the former would be certain to appear, but felt doubts if Mary Montgomerie would be permitted to accept for herself; and great was his surprise and joy when, next day,

acceptances came promptly from Sir Piers for Mary, Miss Erroll, and Hew Montgomerie, dated, not from Eaglescraig, but from the general's town residence at the west-end of the city.

She was to be in Edinburgh for the remainder of the season; balls, assemblies, drums, and parties at which they would be sure to meet, were before her and Falconer, and he contemplated the coming weeks as being pregnant with every enjoyment, with many a charm and source of pleasure.

And greater would his present joy have been had he known how Mary treasured the invitation his hand had addressed, with a wistful yearning for his presence, for the pressure of his hands, and the sound of his love-words over again. For since his advent at Eaglescraig, Mary had begun a new existence—a new life of self-devotion and romance.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PROGRESS OF EVENTS.

'A COMPANY—I am a captain now!' thought Cecil, as he sat alone in his quarters one evening. Promotion brought him, he hoped, a little nearer *her;* but she was far off from him still, by her surroundings and the influences that were brought to bear upon her.

He recalled the words of a writer who says: 'When a young man wants to marry a girl, he has already made up his mind that she is worthy of him, otherwise he would not wish to marry her. The next thing to do is to make a rigid cross-examination of himself, and see whether *he* is worthy of her.' Falconer did so, and, of course, deemed himself immeasurably the inferior of Mary, but more than all in worldly prospects and even social position, albeit that he was now a captain of the Cameronians; and yet only that evening, in the mess-room, he had heard rattling Dick Freeport say, that it was 'the duty of every man wearing a red coat to hook an heiress, if he wanted one.'

He looked around the room in which he sat, his 'quarters,' and smiled, in spite of himself, as he mentally contrasted its appurtenances—its 'fixings,' as the Americans say—with such as were deemed absolutely necessary to the existence of one so refined as Mary Montgomerie, and he began to surmise whether or not his love was a selfish one.

The bare floor, scrubbed, however, as clean as his servant, Tommy Atkins, could make it; the walls white-washed, and liable to impart their tint to everything that came in contact with them; a couple of Windsor chairs; a table liable to unpleasant collapses, especially if sat upon, as it often was; an iron camp-bed, wherein to dream of Mary and glory, with a strip of carpet, as a luxury, by its side; a washstand that took the form of a square box when the route came; a tin tub, tilted up on end in a corner; an iron coal-box, or scuttle, royally marked with 'V.R.' and an imperial crown; a fire-grate full of torn billets and cigar-ends; a rack containing sticks, whips, a couple of swords; a little narrow mantelpiece, littered with pipes, cigars, and havanna boxes; but no flowers, and not a single pretty knickknack suggestive of female influences were there. Destitute of all ornament, it was essentially a man's apartment—a very barrack-room.

Yet some feminine memorials of 'auld lang syne' were not wanting; for in Cecil's most secret repositories were the treasured letters of his mother, her photos, a lock of her dark hair, thickly silvered with white, and a bunch of withered daisies that he had gathered on her grave, which she had found in a distant land—mementoes treasured all the more that the story of her life had been a sad one.

If the interior of Cecil's apartment was plain to excess, the view from its windows was second to none in the world. On one side, far down below, spread the Edina of the Georgian and Victorian ages; on the other towered up Dunedin, grey and grim, in all the dead majesty of a grand, historical, and royal past—the Dunedin of battle and siege, yet instinct with life and vitality in all its pulses still; and far, far away, to where

the golden sun was setting at the gates of the west, spread the wondrous landscape, till the green Ochil ranges and the pale blue cone of Ben Lomond, sixty miles distant, closed it in.

And anon, when darkness falls, more wondrous still is the beauty of the scene when the broken masses and spiky ridges of the old town sparkle with ten thousand lights. 'High in air a bridge leaps the chasm between,' wrote one who knew it well; 'a few emerald lamps, like glow-worms, are moving about in the railway station below, while a solitary crimson one is at rest. That ridged bulk of blackness, with splendour bursting out at every pore, is the wonderful Old Town where Scottish history mainly transacted itself, while opposite the modern Princes Street is blazing throughout its length. During the day the castle looks down upon the city, as if out of another world; stern with all its peacefulness, its garniture of trees, its slopes of grass. The rock is dingy enough in colour, but after a shower its lichens laugh out greenly in the returning sun, while the rainbow is brightening on the lowering sky beyond. How deep the shadow which the castle throws at noon over the gardens at its feet, where the children play! How grand when giant bulk and towering crown blacken against the sunset!'

Gazing dreamily from his window, Cecil sat lost in thought, with a note in his hand—the acceptance to the ball invitation—a note written, he knew, by the hand of Mary, and which he had rescued from Dick Freeport, who was sacrilegiously about to tear and toss it into the waste-paper basket; and at the time we may suppose that our lover felt as Sir Robert Cotton did when he rescued the original Magna Charta from the shears of the Cockney tailor, who was about to cut it into yard-measures for doublets and trunk hose.

But Cecil roused himself when the drums beat on the slope below the citadel gate, and donning his mess-dress, he betook him to the dinner-table, where the trophied silver plate added splendour to luxury.

'So, as the general is in town, you'll leave a card, of course,

Falconer,' said Fotheringhame, with a peculiar smile, as Cecil took a seat by his side.

'I am in duty bound to do so; though, sooth to say,' added Falconer, for their confidences had become mutual, 'the coldness that accompanied my departure from Eaglescraig gives me unpleasant doubts of my reception; yet leave a card, of course, I must.'

Then he thought of Mary on the morning he came away, and the farewell wave of her handkerchief.

'If I call, Fotheringhame, won't you accompany me?'

'Thanks; no, old fellow; you forget.'

'What?'

'That Miss Erroll's acceptance for the ball came from the general's house.'

'A pleasant place it will be to visit,' said Dick Freeport, striking into the conversation from the opposite side of the table. 'I have had Falconer's confidential report on the subject; he states that the general's cellar is excellent, the sherry pale and dry, the old port full-bodied, the Château Lagrange unequalled, and Moët's Imperial ditto! His cook is a regular French *chef*, with a salary that exceeds the pay of Sir Piers himself, no doubt; and then there is his ward——'

'Halt, Dick! how your tongue runs on!' said Cecil, with some annoyance. 'His ward is not to be lightly spoken of at any mess-table—ours especially.'

'I saw the general's carriage to-day in George Street,' cried a cheeky sub-lieutenant from the lower end of the table. 'I knew it by the coat-of-arms; and, by Jove, there were two stunning girls in it!'

'Miss Montgomerie and her friend Miss Erroll, no doubt,' said Fotheringhame. 'One dark—a brunette, and the other brilliantly fair?'

'Exactly; I took stock of them both. Dick will be bringing his engagement-ring with the blue stone into action now.'

As this was a regimental joke it caused a little laugh, amid which Acharn, the sporting man of the corps, came in

hastily in his mess-jacket and vest, looking rather grim and cross.

'Late for mess, old man,' said Fotheringhame. 'What is up, eh?'

'Wine!' said Acharn sharply, to a waiter, and then replied: 'Only that I am rather up a tree just now.'

'You are rather fond of climbing,' said Fotheringhame. 'Is it lofty?'

'Lofty as a Himalayan pine, by Jove! I say, Falconer, you were at the general's place, Eaglescraig—or what's its name?'

'Yes.'

'Was there a fellow named Hew Montgomerie there?'

'Yes.'

'Hew Caddish Montgomerie, as his pasteboard has it—he is well named! and from whom you won at cards?'

'No; but who utterly rooked me at cards!' said Falconer angrily, while he and Fotheringhame exchanged glances.

'Well, I met him at the United Service Club this afternoon, though he is not a member. We somehow got into play, and I have lost enough to make my governor pull a very long face when he comes to hear of it—a cool £500. He is a fellow whose shifty eyes and thin lips often smile, but never in unison.'

'I know that his face never wears an expression of manly truth—for truth isn't in him!' said Falconer.

'The fellow is a downright cad, I understand,' said Fotheringhame; 'he will go to the devil with the down-train, and never know how to put on the breaks. Why were you fool enough to play with a stranger?'

'And lose?' said Acharn, twisting his black moustache.

'By all accounts it would be a miracle if you *won*.'

'He has promised me my revenge to-morrow.'

'At what game was it you lost £500?' asked Fotheringhame.

'At roulette, piquet, and écarté; but mostly at écarté.'

'By Jove! I should think so,' said Falconer, remembering Hew's 'mild play.' 'Why didn't you look under the table?' he asked in a low voice.

'For what?' exclaimed Acharn, with surprise.

'The cards he was dropping unknown to you.'

'Good heavens! do you say so?'

'Why, the fellow's a regular leg!' said Fotheringhame; but Falconer contented himself by saying:

'Your promised revenge will never come. Next time he asks you to play, decline, and say you do so by my advice—*mine*—don't forget.'

Acharn did so, and the fact did not increase Master Hew's goodwill to Falconer; but little indeed could the latter guess how the good old general had been led to view *him*.

A favourite with the entire regiment he was known to be, even to the very school-children; thus it was with some surprise the commanding-officer, some days after, heard the remarks of the general at the club, made privately to himself, however.

'I have to thank you, Sir Piers,' said the lieutenant-colonel, 'for extending the hospitality of your house to one of the best of my officers.'

'Best—the smartest, perhaps, you mean?' said Sir Piers coldly.

'Smartest and best!' replied the lieutenant-colonel emphatically.

'Sorry to hear it, sir! sorry to hear it. When we were cantoned at Jodpore——'

'Excuse me, Sir Piers; but I do not understand.'

'He is too fond of cards, sir—too fond of cards for my taste, sir.'

'I never saw a card in his hand!' persisted the other.

'Strange!'

The lieutenant-colonel thought these remarks more than strange, too; but Sir Piers did not choose to inform him of Hew's malevolent reports, and plunged at once into sundry reminiscences of Jodpore and its Rajpoots.

Mary would certainly be the queen of the forthcoming regimental ball, and Falconer was full of the most delightful anticipations concerning it.

'Leslie Fotheringhame will be there!' was the secret thought

of Annabelle Erroll; 'how *are* we to meet? As strangers? Would that I had not come to Edinburgh at all—and yet!'

Yet—what? She scarcely knew.

Mary was in full anticipation also of the ball—its joys and its brilliance, and nightly laid her head on the pillow to sleep and dream, if she could, of a region where all was romance, light, and splendour, bands of music, festooned banners and brilliant uniforms, with one central figure—Cecil Falconer!

CHAPTER XX.

THE OLD STORY AGAIN.

IT may easily be supposed that Cecil Falconer did not lose much time in paying what was to pass ostensibly as a ceremonious visit to Sir Piers Montgomerie's family. Evening parade was over, when he quitted the fortress in a carefully assorted suit of mufti, and betook him to the north-western quarter of the New Town, in one of the most fashionable streets of which stood the stately house of the general, in a situation of wonderfully picturesque beauty, overlooking the deep ravine through which the Leith flows under a noble bridge of three arches, each of which is ninety-six feet in span.

On one side stands an ancient tolbooth, with crow-stepped gables; on the other, a steep green bank crowned by a beautiful church and stately crescent. Between these yawns the rocky ravine, wherein lie an old bridge of other days, and a cluster of quaint mills and dwellings, and the river roaring in snow-white foam over a broad and lofty weir; the whole place having in all its features a marvellous resemblance to the Spanish village of Banos in Leon.

And now, when Falconer stood upon the threshold of the mansion, there flashed upon his mind the recollection that on this very day it was that his father and mother had both died—the latter on the anniversary of the former's demise, eighteen years before; thus he doubted whether he had chosen a fortu-

nate time, for it has truly been said, that there are certain moods of the human mind in which we cannot help ascribing 'an ominous importance to any remarkable concidence wherein things of moment are concerned;' and he was in this mood then.

In obedience to the sonorous bell, the double-door was thrown open, revealing one of those spacious entrance-halls peculiar to Scottish houses, with tiger-skins—some of Sir Piers' Indian spoils—and Persian rugs covering the length of its tesselated floor, and marble pedestals with tall Chinese and Japanese vases standing on either side.

The general had gone to his club, in Queen Street; Mrs. Garth and Miss Erroll were out in the carriage, but were expected back soon; Miss Montgomerie was at home. So said the valet, who remembered Falconer, and smiled a welcome to him, but said nothing of the whereabouts of Hew, who was a favourite with none.

Mary was then at home, and perhaps alone, so Cecil's heart beat lightly and happily as he was ushered into the stately double drawing-room, which had hangings of rose-coloured silk laced with white, and was stately with crystal chandeliers, venetian mirrors, cabinets of rare china, statuettes, and gems of art in the way of pictures and jars, amid which the eyes of Falconer saw only Mary Montgomerie—Mary seated near an antique tripod table, whereon was set out the dainty Wedgewood china for five o'clock tea, and varying her time between knitting soft woollen socks for some old cotter of Eaglescraig, and gazing from the window on the buds of spring that were bursting in the warm sunshine, and the sweet flowers that made the parterres gay; but she started from her chair when the servant announced,

'Captain Falconer.'

She repeated the name mechanically, and grew very pale as she presented her hand.

'Do not call me "captain,"' urged Cecil, retaining it, while the thoughts of both went naturally back to their last meeting in the grotto, and the avowal made then; and Mary grew shy

in manner, for she had been haunted by a dread lest her wave of the handkerchief to Cecil on his departure from Eaglescraig had been unladylike, though Annabelle assured her that, after all that had passed, any young girl would have done precisely the same.

'But you *are* a captain now,' she said, smiling; 'and I congratulate you upon the circumstance. It has given me real pleasure, you may be well assured.'

'I thank you, from my heart,' replied Cecil, and she withdrew her hand, while he was longing to take up the links of the old story, gathering even courage from the omen that Snarley, in a new blue and silver collar, with his mistress's monogram and a bell, barked, whimpered, and frisked about him with delight.

Snarley had an undoubted propensity for worrying rats in the stable court, under the auspices of Hew Montgomerie and Pate Pastern, the head-groom; also proclivities for the kitchen and low life generally: but here he was in the drawing-room to welcome the visitor.

'You knew I would call?' said Falconer, after a pause.

'I—hoped you would,' said Mary timidly.

'You did!' he exclaimed in a low voice, as he started to her side. 'Oh, my darling!'

'Yes—of course,' replied Mary faintly, and blushing deeply now, as he took both her hands in his and gazed into her eyes with passionate tenderness; and somehow it came speedily to pass that as they stood so near, they were posed like the Black Brunswicker and his love, or the Huguenot and his guardian angel, in the well-known pictures; but if the pose was delicious, the speeches that accompanied it were a little fatuous and incoherent.

After a time, Falconer, still holding her in his embrace and gazing tenderly into her upturned eyes, made the somewhat prosaic request:

'You will keep some round dances for me at the ball, of course, darling?'

'Gladly would I do so, dearest Cecil—but——'

'But what, Mary love?'

'I am under such supervision—Hew, for instance——'

'It is intolerable!' said Falconer, as a gesture of impatience escaped him. 'To love you, and say that I love you, dearest Mary, means views of marriage, and the hope that you will be mine—mine for ever, sweetest pet,' he continued, with infinite tenderness of tone and manner, taking her little face between his hands, after the mode of the pictured Huguenot; but Mary partially and nervously withdrew from him. 'You are free, Mary, are you not?' he asked, with great and sudden anxiety.

There was no answer, and she seemed intently studying the pattern of the carpet.

'You are not, you cannot be, engaged!' he exclaimed in a low and earnest voice, and dreading some change since they parted.

'No, certainly—not of my own free will,' was her curious reply, while tears trembled on her dark lashes.

'How then?'

'Mrs. Garth told you all, did she not?'

'Do you know your own mind, Mary?' he asked, taking her caressingly in his arms.

'Yes,' said she, with a sob in her throat.

'How is it to be, then?'

There was no answer.

'Mary!'

She could scarcely have made any reply just then, as Cecil closed her sweet lips most effectually.

'Hew actually takes his position with me for granted,' said she, after a little pause, with her head reclined on Cecil's shoulder. 'He is absurd, and insolent as a wooer, yet seems to think there is no need for exerting himself to win a bride that is bestowed upon him. He treats me as if I were his property—a gift from Sir Piers in fact,' she continued with an angry little laugh.

'And you, with all your beauty and wealth too, Mary, are to

become the sacrifice of an old man's ambition to endow his house, and a young man's avarice! Oh, my darling, it is monstrous! and in this age of the world, ridiculous too! But perhaps the good old general may come round in time, and see the folly of his scheme.'

She shook her head, and said brokenly:

'You speak of wealth—I would I were penniless, for your sake; it is as a millstone about my neck: I think papa's will was most iniquitous!'

Until Mary Montgomerie met and knew Cecil Falconer, she had lived like the lady of Shalott, in a world of dreams—a young girl's dreams of a lover; for even the advent of Hew as an admirer—an intended—had certainly not embodied the idea to her.

She had read in Byron that a woman's love was a woman's whole existence, and such she would have made it now to herself; and doubtless had Cecil chosen to exert the power he had over her heart, and lured her, as one less scrupulous might have done, into risking the *esclandre*, he would have persuaded her to defy Sir Piers and fly with him; but he never for a moment entertained the idea of a measure that would have been such injustice to herself, as it would have involved the loss of her fortune, and perhaps its eventual transference to Hew!

Snarley now suddenly showed his teeth, as if to announce the approach of the latter through the outer-drawing room, where it would almost seem that he had been again an unseen listener, as at Eaglescraig.

'*Petit chien!*' exclaimed Mary, as the Huguenot pose was suddenly relinquished, and she snatched up her dog to kiss it; '*petit chien*—dear wee doggie, don't be jealous of—oh, it's *you*, Hew—how tiresome!' she added under her breath, as that personage lounged upon the scene, and drily gave his cold, fishy hand to Falconer.

'Hew again!' thought Mary with a shiver of repugnance; and again, as in the instance of the grotto, she marvelled, with intense annoyance, how much he had overseen and overheard, and how long he had been *en perdue!*

Nearly ignoring the presence of Falconer, who assumed his hat and gloves, he bowed coldly and said curtly:

'I am about to have a canter down Granton way: will you join me, Mary?'

'I would rather be excused.'

'Why?'

'It is anything but a pretty road—all stone walls and no trees.'

Hew scowled. The answer showed plainly that his company would not compensate for the dulness of the road—'and before that fellow Falconer, too!'

'Annabelle will go perhaps.'

'She is out with the old soldier, Mrs. Garth.'

'Hew!' she exclaimed, while with curiously mingled emotions of delight and annoyance, Falconer, deeming that the time had come to depart, bowed himself out as Hew rang the bell.

'Ha!' thought the latter, 'she will not ride with me, and she has not driven out with them, so she expected this fellow! They have some secret understanding unknown to Sir Piers, most certainly. But they have not yet come to the third volume of their little romance!'

Mary read his thoughts and suspicions in his face, and her heart swelled with anger.

'We must stop this nonsense, Hew—or you must, I mean,' said she abruptly, and with flashing eyes.

'Stop it?'

'Yes, as I mean to be the mistress of my own actions; and the sooner your interference with me ends, the better for us both.'

'What do you mean?'

'What I say, sir!' replied Mary desperately, and with tears in her eyes as she swept from the room; for though she deferred to the years and affection of Sir Piers, she was resolved *now* to have neither mercy nor toleration for Hew, who eyed her malevolently as she withdrew.

Sweet indeed had been the love-passage between these two

—Cecil and Mary—knitting their hearts closer together. Affection had been ensured to the full and been accepted to the full; but no promise had been given, and the future was vague as ever.

Cecil had a species of rival in Hew, certainly; but one that, strange to say, provoked no jealousy, anger, or sense of suspicion, though there were the influence and authority of Sir Piers to dread, together with what might be their ultimate result upon the gentle nature of Mary, who might be bent to accept the fate intended for her, as being but a portion of the inevitable. Besides, if the regiment were ordered suddenly abroad, the chances of their ever meeting again would be faint and few indeed.

Though Hew, as we have already indicated, had no genuine love for Mary, he fully appreciated the wonderful beauty of her person, and endorsed to the full the general's desire that he should marry her, and a creditable wife indeed she would be to the future baronet of Eaglescraig; thus his piqued self-esteem and his avarice rendered him secretly savage that he made worse than no progress with her in his wooing. He felt as if placed in rather a ridiculous position with his patron; and thus the whole tide of his venom flowed towards the innocent Falconer, though the appearance of the latter on the scene had not changed in the least degree Mary's views of him—Hew Montgomerie.

There was no open quarrel between the latter and Falconer, but each had a very decided repugnance to the other, and the soldier knew and felt him to be his secret enemy; and in their chance intercourse in public places and at the U.S. club, whither he came under the general's wing, the veiled hatred of Hew grew deeper as he felt instinctively that he was every way, in tone, in bearing, and in mind, the inferior of Falconer.

He became more than usually boorish, for about this time he had a curious run of ill-luck in his turf speculations; 'straight tips' had turned out the reverse of straight; 'good things' on coming events had turned out badly too; he had been jockeyed

and wanted money sorely, having lost in a few hours all that he had won from Acharn, while the latter, instead of proposing to have his revenge, mentioned incidentally 'his friend Falconer,' and declined all play; the next time Acharn cut him *dead*, and he began to find all players avoiding him.

Though Mrs. Garth was invaluable as a chaperon, such a guardian is not so necessary in the streets of 'the Queen of the North' as in those of the sister metropolis; consequently Mary could go abroad alone whenever she chose, while curiously enough she seemed to have lost all taste for the use of the carriage now.

CHAPTER XXI.

'A WEAK INVENTION OF THE ENEMY.'

HEW resolved, as before, to lose no time in putting Sir Piers on his guard; he would give him an 'eye-opener,' he thought; and, in his ignorance of military discipline and etiquette, almost conceived that the baronet, as full colonel of the regiment, might have power to issue, perhaps, some very stringent and crushing order concerning the culprit.

Hew, among other 'caddish' tastes and propensities, was fond of 'sherry-glass flirtations' at bars and buffets, where sham smiles are bartered for button-hole flowers, amid bantered compliments and honeyed small-talk, not always remarkable for its purity; and while engaged in one of these little affairs, he made the casual acquaintance of Herr Von Humstrumm, the regimental bandmaster, a somewhat obese-looking German, with an enormous moustache and his scrubby dark hair shorn remarkably short; and from the latter he drew—or alleged to Sir Piers that he drew—some account of the family and antecedents of Cecil Falconer; and with these he came home highly elated; and whatever the conversation really was, the

communications did not suffer diminution in his relation of them; and he broke the matter to Sir Piers in a cold, hard, and exultant way, that could scarcely fail to strike the latter as being, at least, ungenerous.

'I have discovered who and what our hero is!' said he.

'Our hero—who?'

'Our late visitor and guest, Mr. Falconer.'

'Captain Falconer. Well?'

'I met the bandmaster the other day, at a luncheon-bar, and he told me all about him,' continued Hew, laughing immoderately.

'I know that in Scottish regiments, especially, every man's family is usually known, his antecedents, and so forth.'

'And *who* do you think this Falconer proves to be?' asked Hew, with malignancy flashing brightly in his parti-coloured eyes. 'A pauper with a long pedigree, you will say. No, by Jove! he has not even *that!*'

'What *do* you mean, Hew?' asked Sir Piers, looking up from his chair, with knitted brow.

'I mean,' replied Hew, 'he may, like the street balladers, sing

> '"I never had a father,
> I never had a mother,
> I never had a sister,
> I never had a brother,
> For indeed I'm nobody's child."'

And adopting the tone and manners of a street-singer, Hew gave this verse with extreme zest and almost fierce exultation, acting the part with such broad vulgarity that his hearer winced; but well did Hew know that he was bringing the strongest argument to bear upon the weakest point in the character of Sir Piers—an inordinate pride of birth and family.

'Good God! you don't say so, Hew?' exclaimed Sir Piers, more sorrow than anger predominating in his mind for a time—but a time only.

'Fact, though,' replied Hew, carefully selecting a cigar from his silver case, 'if a certain chain of deductions may be trusted,

and I know that the thought of his obscure birth is gall and wormwood to him—have seen him blush for it more than once, at Eaglescraig.'

'His father——' began Sir Piers.

'Nobody knows who that illustrious individual was. I suppose he doesn't know himself, though he must have had one.'

'And his mother?'

'Was a singer, or actress, or something of that kind. Folks in the musical world, like folks on the turf, all know something of each other, and so this fellow, Von Humstrumm, assured me that—that it is all as I say; and thus his excellence as a singer and pianist is accounted for at once. The Herr told me that he had performed at the private concerts given in the house of a noble lady in Belgravia, when the inner drawing-room was turned into quite a beautiful *bijou salon de concert*, and even royalty was present. Pretty circumstantial that!'

'Extraordinary!'

'Not at all; there is nothing extraordinary in this world. Thus I should not wonder if the fellow once figured before the footlights! Gad, if the Cameronians only knew of this, they'd put him in Coventry—force him to quit!'

'Then how the devil does this bandmaster come to know, if *they* don't?' said Sir Piers, pacing the room in great annoyance of spirit. 'I don't understand all this! Was he not a Sandhurst cadet?'

'I don't know, and don't care,' responded Hew, with an access of sullenness.

'He certainly seems a finished gentleman.

'I have heard you admire his hands as being white and shapely,' said Hew, with a sneer.

'Yes; but what of that?'

'Did you ever observe his mode of gesticulating with them?'

'No.'

'Well, *I* have, and to me it seemed to indicate foreign blood and player-like proclivities.'

Hew's hands were neither white nor shapely, and certainly

bore no indication of that refinement of race on which his listener set such store.

'We have not heard the last of this fellow,' he resumed, after a pause.

'The last! What do you mean?'

'His interference in our family affairs. A card-playing fortune-hunter, as I denounced him to be before; he was here no longer ago than yesterday afternoon, pursuing his designs upon our soft-hearted, and I must say, remarkably soft-headed, Mary! I felt inclined to chuck him through the window. Must not this matter be stopped, sir, and with the strong hand?'

'Stopped? I should think so! Should he attempt to cross me, he'd better touch the fuse of a live shell!' replied the old man sharply, while memory went back to the bitter times when his young Piers, so loved, petted, and prized, forgot the traditions of his family, and daringly linked his fate with a humble girl, whom the proud baronet declined to receive or recognise, most unwisely, as he thought at times now.

'We are an old family, Hew,' he resumed, after a pause; 'and you will be the inheritor of my title in an untarnished condition; but you must not rest upon it alone, and with Mary's money added to what I have to leave you—Eaglescraig, wood and wold, tower and manor-place—great things may be achieved. You will cherish Mary when I am gone, even as I have cherished her; for I have nothing else now,' he added, as he thought of his dead son and the never-to-be-forgotten night of the dread and shadowy vision.

'I cannot persuade her to enter even into a preliminary and formal engagement with me,' said Hew, after another pause.

'But,' urged the general, polishing his bald head with fidgety irritation, 'surely, by this time, something is understood?'

'That—that she will one day be my wife?

'Yes, of course.'

'But when?'

'When I issue *the order!*' said Sir Piers, as he stood with his back to the fire and his feet planted on the hearthrug in orderly-room fashion.

Hew smiled feebly, as if he feared Mary would care little for such a ukase.

'Devil take this forthcoming ball!' he exclaimed suddenly. 'That fellow will be there, of course.'

'In his regimentals, too—a good old phrase that!' said Sir Piers. 'But the ball *is* somewhat of a nuisance, especially as Mary is not yet *disillusionné*. Yet she is not a child, that I may prevent her going to where she has set her heart upon. But one thing is certain; she must neither speak to, nor dance with him on that occasion.'

'I should think not!' said Hew savagely.

'It is very unfortunate for you, my dear lad, if she has conceived any absurd fancy for this young man.'

'Oh, I don't care much for that, or whether or not the bloom is quite wiped off the plum,' was the nonchalant reply of Hew, at whose remark the general elevated his eyebrows.

When Mary heard of this alleged conversation, of which Hew lost no time in acquainting her, though ignorant as to whether the matter in regard to poor Falconer was a deliberate fabrication of his rival or a coarse exaggeration, she only smiled scornfully at it, as 'a weak invention of the enemy;' but her conviction was, that whether invention or not, it was calculated to have a most fatal influence upon the already sweet relations between herself and Cecil; and we can but hope that its truth or falsity will be discovered in the sequel.

CHAPTER XXII.

CECIL RECEIVES HIS CONGÉ.

SIR PIERS' indignation with Cecil Falconer for presuming to address his ward in the language of love was very great, and he was in the act of 'nursing his wrath to keep it warm,' and

studying how to circumvent one whom he deemed only a well-accredited adventurer, when next afternoon the latter, all unaware of *how* the general had been schooled to view him, was ushered into the library, where the former was idling over the preceding evening's *War-Office Gazette.* 'It is easier to conceive than describe,' says Oliver Goldsmith, 'the complicated sensations which are felt from the pain of a recent injury and the pleasure of approaching vengeance.' The two were suddenly face to face!

But Sir Piers, a courteous soldier and gentleman of the old school, though smarting and indignant, was resolved, that whatever turn the conversation took, he would neither forget their relative positions of host and visitor, or as officers in her Majesty's service.

He felt himself, however, on the horns of a dilemma. He had no precise right, he thought, to act on Hew's painful information in any way, obtained as it was from a source so subordinate; and he could not, without some distinct reason, forbid his recently welcome guest to visit his house, though he was resolved to tell old Tunley to strike his name off the visitors' list. Unaware of all the mischief that was brewing, Falconer advanced cordially towards the old general, who rose and gave him his hand, if not very frankly, and said stiffly:

'Captain Falconer, I congratulate you on your promotion, sir; I hope it will prove an incentive to future good conduct and *esprit de corps;* but avoid cards, sir—avoid cards!'

Ignorant of how the speaker viewed him as a gambler, almost an adventurer and man of obscure birth, all as alleged by Hew, Falconer was alike surprised by this pointed remark and rather indignant at the tone in which it was said, and the general bearing adopted by Sir Piers.

He now inquired for the ladies, and was snappishly told that 'they were well, sir—well;' but whether at home or not, Sir Piers did not condescend to say; so Falconer almost held his breath at every sound, expecting Mary to enter the room; but he hoped in vain, for never even once did a light footstep

or the rustle of a dress announce her vicinity. However, he had barely seated himself, when Sir Piers, as if reading his very thoughts, said bluntly:

'I wished to see you, sir, on a subject that has recently come to my knowledge. You have been addressing Miss Montgomerie in terms which no honourable man would do, without the full permission of those who are nearest and dearest to her, and have thus her welfare and her future at heart.'

Falconer, who felt painfully that in tone, bearing, and expression of eye, Sir Piers was now very unlike the hearty and hospitable veteran who welcomed him to Eaglescraig, said, with a somewhat faltering voice:

'All who have the happiness to know Miss Montgomerie will ever have her welfare and happiness at heart, Sir Piers.'

'Am I right in asserting what I do, Captain Falconer?' asked the latter, ignoring his remark.

'Before being borne away by my feelings, and permitting myself to address your grand-neice——'

'And ward. Yes, sir—well?'

'I ought, doubtless, to have obtained your sanction——'

'Or sought for it—well, sir—well?'

'And have satisfied you as to—as to——'

'Your means and position?' interrupted the old man, impatiently.

'Yes, Sir Piers,' said Falconer, taking up his hat, which he again set down.

'By the way, it has never occurred to me to ask you fully and distinctly who you are—but now I seem to have some right to do so,' said Sir Piers, as all Hew's promptings came to memory.

'Who I am?' exclaimed Falconer, partially cresting up his head, yet colouring too evidently with mental pain, as the keen eyes of his questioner could see.

'Yes, sir.'

'I am, as you know, Captain Cecil Falconer, of the Cameronian regiment,' he replied, somewhat haughtily.

'Anything more?'

'In what way?'

'Family—antecedents. The devil! do you think that I would permit a nameless stranger to address Miss Montgomerie as you have done?'

'I am not rich, certainly—the reverse rather.'

'I don't care an *anna* for that, as we say in India; but as regards family——'

'Suffice it that I am utterly alone in the world,' interrupted Cecil, with a cadence in his voice that made the general feel some pity for him, though not inclined to yield an inch, for his words seemed to corroborate all that Hew had alleged or inferred. 'When my poor mother died, I seemed, for a time, to lose the last link that bound me to the world. To her I owe education, position, the commission I hold—everything!'

And now, when he spoke of his mother, his voice grew soft and infinitely tender, and a subdued light shone in his averted eyes—the light of love and a great reverence.

'And your father?' said the general, in a softer voice.

'I can remember but faintly: he died when I was very young. My mother never ceased to sorrow for him, and yet I fear, at times, that her marriage had not been a happy one, or that he had not deserved one so brilliant and talented as she was.'

'Oho!' thought the general; 'this refers to the musical world, evidently. Hew is right, after all.'

'It was selfish of me, perhaps, to leave her to be a soldier, for she was alone in life; but it was inspired by love for her, and to gain her esteem, that I worked so hard to become worthy of her, and rise in all that might promote me in my profession. In the School of Musketry at Hythe, in signalling and telegraph, at the School of Engineering in Chatham, I won first-class certificates, and laid them, like a happy schoolboy, in her lap. Since then I have passed out, one of the first, from the Staff College; and if I went to India——'

'Ah yes; go to India, sir, that is the place!' said the

general, soothed a little and almost forgetting the 'cards.' 'But our conversation has wandered from the subject that introduced it,' he resumed, 'pulling himself together,' and resolved to be cool and determined, and for Hew's sake to end for ever this love-affair. 'In addition to what I said, sir, I have to add, that an honourable man should not make advances to an heiress—I mean if he is poor—and, in my time, all the Cameronians were men of honour!'

Falconer thought that a Cameronian might still very well make love to a pretty girl with a long purse, and not forfeit that commodity which the general so unpleasantly emphasised; but an emotion of hopelessness began to creep into his heart, and he rose from his seat, though reluctant to withdraw: yet the interview was fated to have an abrupt and harsh *finale.*

'Captain Falconer,' said Sir Piers, after a little pause, 'Miss Montgomerie has never disobeyed me since she came to my house an orphan; since she was a little child that stood upon my knee and nestled her face in my neck, begging me to tell her the same story over and over again—often an Indian yarn of snakes, tigers, and what not—and I know that she won't disobey me now.'

'I hope not, Sir Piers, so far as I am concerned.'

'I am averse to long and vague engagements, and have made up my mind to terminate hers by a speedy marriage with her *fiancé*, Hew Montgomerie, my heir of entail, as you know. They must marry at once, or—or——'

'Or what, Sir Piers?' asked Falconer in a low voice.

'She loses every shilling of her fortune by marriage with another.'

'Gladly—oh, how gladly!—would I take her penniless; but I shall not be guilty of injustice towards her; she should be permitted to choose for herself. God help us!' said Falconer, in a very broken voice. 'Good Sir Piers, let me see her once again, I implore you, just for five minutes,' he added, scarcely aware of what he was saying.

'Better not, better not, sir; it is useless,' said the general,

growing stern; 'much mischief may be done in five minutes. Once and for ever, sir, let this folly end! I brought you most unwisely to my house, and you used your time there in seeking to detach the affections of my ward, Miss Montgomerie, from her affianced husband. Of the good taste that inspired such a line of secret conduct I say nothing; but I repeat, that this scheme on your part (I speak not of folly on hers, for I hope she has been guilty of none) must end; and I have the honour to wish you—good-morning.'

He rang the bell, and with a heart swollen by many emotions, Falconer bowed and quitted the room. As he did so, there was in his face an expression of painful humiliation mingled with reproach, that powerfully brought back another and an almost similar scene, when he had expelled from Eaglescraig his son Piers, and when kindly old John Balderstone strove—but in vain—to effect a reconciliation between them.

His cool dismissal by the general, and the curious questions of the latter, made Cecil's blood boil with indignation. Had he only known all, it might have proved a bad business for the bones of Mr. Hew Montgomerie.

Despite the injunction laid upon him, the moth could not be kept from the candle. A fortnight had passed since the general's ukase had gone forth, and yet almost daily, by accident, design, or tacit understanding, Cecil and Mary met, and had the joy of lingering in each other's society, and riveting still closer the links of love that bound them to each other, but not without a dread of being watched or discovered by Hew, whose favourite haunts, however, lay far apart from theirs.

The spacious gardens, the parks, the hills, the half-empty West-end squares and crescents, the picture-galleries and promenades, afforded many facilities for such, apparently unpremeditated, meetings as theirs, and to Mary it seemed as if she had only now commenced to live, and as if all her past life had only been leading up to this, the end of which she happily, could not then foresee.

As for Cecil, the very demon of restlessness seemed to have taken possession of him. Save when on duty, the Cameronians never saw him, and he was never happy save when, if not with Mary, searching for her in those lounges where, in the limited circle of the Modern Athens—the City of Idlers—everyone is almost sure to meet everybody else.

But he had one special annoyance to contend with. All the regiment knew that he had been the general's special guest at Eaglescraig, and deemed it strange that at all his dinners and dances given to them now, *he* was never present. Why was this? All deemed it 'deuced odd,' and Cecil writhed under their surmises, some of which were repeated to him by Leslie Fotheringhame and Dick Freeport, and a sentiment of defiance became engendered in his mind.

And it was with fresh annoyance that on parade some morning, or at mess in the evening, he heard some heedless fellow extolling the rare beauty of the general's ward, and mingling the praises thereof with the extreme appreciation of his wines and the culinary efforts of his *chef;* and somewhat of a crisis was put upon this, when Sir Piers dined with the regiment, 'in full fig,' and wearing all his medals, on the anniversary of its embodiment, the 19th April, 1689, and treated Falconer with a coldness of bearing that was but too apparent to all; thus rousing a kind of resentment in his heart, and a greater inclination to defy him in the matter of his now secret engagement with Mary, for such it formally was: but then, how about the terrible power Sir Piers held over her in virtue of her father's eccentric will?

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE PRINCES STREET GARDENS.

Among those invited to the house of Sir Piers Montgomerie was Leslie Fotheringhame, of course; but he knew, from Falconer, that Annabelle Erroll was still a guest of the family, as

she and Mary were a pair of inseparables; and compunction for his past treatment of her, and doubt of how she remembered him now, with a great fear of being contemptuously ignored by her, led him to decline, on every occasion, the invitation accorded, on various pretences.

Annabelle Erroll knew of this, and was piqued accordingly, so the old breach between these two grew wider, if possible. Cecil and Mary, as 'a fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind,' had a great desire to make peace between them; the former had told her of the love-making and quarrel by the river, and her sympathy was readily enlisted in the matter.

'You do love him still!' said Mary, as the two were exchanging confidences in the seclusion of their mutual dressing-room at night; 'at least I know, by your changing colour whenever his name is mentioned, that you have not forgotten how to do so.'

'One cannot forget having loved—or having loved him, at least,' replied Annabelle, in a soft voice.

'Would you marry him if he asked you now?'

'Decidedly not!' exclaimed Annabelle, whose golden hair was floating over her snowy neck, while, unaided, she was plaiting it up with deft fingers and throwing it this way and that, in masses, turning her graceful head sideways to see how they fell, and perhaps to admire the charming curve of her own white shoulders.

'You do not believe me?' she said, as Mary laughed at her reply.

'No—because, as I said, at the very mention of his name, even by me, your cheek flushes and your voice trembles.'

'If they do, it is with just anger,' said Annabelle, 'and you are mistaken, dear Mary; and I have read, that when an estrangement begins between two who have loved each other, it is like a tiny stream of water, which goes on widening and deepening day by day, until it becomes a river no bridge can span.'

'Will I ever be estranged from Cecil?' thought Mary. 'Oh no—no—no!'

Various pretty and amiable little schemes formed by Mary to bring them together, with Cecil's aid, failed, and yet their meeting ultimately came to pass in the most commonplace way imaginable.

With the opening season come the weekly promenades in the beautiful Princes Street Gardens, where the regimental bands play in the afternoons, for the delectation of the fashionables and idlers of the West End.

Bordered on one side by the most magnificent terrace and promenade in Europe, and on the other by the emerald-green bank of the Castle Hill, with all its waving trees, and by the mighty mass of the beetling rock on which stands the hoary fortress of a thousand memories, and more than a thousand years, these gardens are altogether unique; and already they were in almost their summer glory, for the air of the valley in which they lie was fragrant with the perfume of mignonette, of clove-carnations, roses, and heliotrope.

The carefully kept shrubberies were gay with borders of brilliant flowers, and amid this varied foliage the laburnum stood up in all the glory of green and gold. In swarms the happy children were gambolling and playing about on the velvet sward or chasing in zigzag fashion the bees and butterflies.

The fair promenaders were in all the bright gaiety of their spring costumes, and the grand echoes of the castle rock were responding to the music of the band under our friend Herr von Humstrumm, when Falconer and Leslie Fotheringhame came sauntering through the throng arm-in-arm, the former watchful for the figure of Mary, and the other languidly indifferent of all on whom he cast his critical eyes, in one of which a glass was fixed.

Suddenly Fotheringhame, who was rather a nonchalant personage, started, and the glass dropped from his eye, for, sooth to say, perhaps he could see better without it.

A young lady passed near him, with other two—an elder and a younger—unseen by Falconer, who was looking in an opposite direction; and there can be no doubt Fotheringhame

looked after her with a yearning in his gaze, so sudden, passionate, and tender, as must have touched her heart had she seen it; but Annabelle Erroll, for it was she, was all unconscious of his presence. Her companions, we need scarcely say, were Mary Montgomerie and Mrs. Garth, an old lady who still dearly 'doted on the military.'

Fotheringhame's first inclination was to quit the promenade and effect an escape; his second thought was to stay, and see her once—only once again. And in sudden silence he continued to walk slowly to and fro with Falconer, till the abrupt turn of a narrow shrubberied avenue brought them both face to face with the three ladies, and there was no retreating; for as Hew disliked society of this kind, and was never present, Mary felt perfect confidence, and welcomed Cecil with one of her brightest smiles, while he—reading her wish at a glance—hastened to utilise the occasion by presenting 'his friend, Fotheringhame of Ours,' to Mrs. Garth and 'Miss Erroll.'

'In for it, by Jove!' muttered Fotheringhame under his heavy black moustache, as he lifted his hat, and saw before him, in her rare blonde beauty and magnificence of style, now fully developed by a few short years, the girl whose artless heart he had won only to cast it at her feet—unclaimed—unprized!

Mary's bright little face was dimpling and rippling all over with pleasure, triumph and exultation—all the more so, when she saw that Leslie Fotheringhame was a man of whom any woman might be proud, more than ordinarily handsome, with an unmistakable tone, air, and bearing, that doubtless came of his early Lancer training; and now they were all conversing together with apparent ease; for although Mrs. Garth knew what the wishes and orders of Sir Piers were regarding Mary and Cecil Falconer, she did not conceive that they extended to the precluding of recognition in a public place.

But had even the suspicious Hew been there, not even he, on seeing the quiet and respectful way in which Cecil raised his hat and lightly took the gloved hand of Mary, could have detected that there was between them the soft and sweet and

inexpressible charm and link of a secret understanding. And indeed none who saw the apparently cool composure with which she greeted him, and talked of the beauty of the weather, the serenity of the sky, of the music then being discoursed by his regimental band, could have suspected that but an hour or so before, in a shady and sequestered place elsewhere, he had showered kisses on her lips, and hair, and eyes, and pressed her to his breast, '*à la* Huguenot,' again and again.

If deceit were practised in all this, it was not their fault, but was born of the pressure that was put upon them.

As the pair now began to promenade together, Cecil of course absorbed Mary, whom Mrs. Garth could not leave; it thus became a matter of course that Annabelle fell to the lot of Fotheringhame, more than perhaps her proud heart assented to. His manner was careful, studied, and deeply courteous. She could not, as yet, detect the slightest sadness in his glance or tone, or aught of tenderness or reproach either, so well did he veil his manner, and yet his heart was full of her; and thus these two, who had been so much to each other—all the world once—were meeting and acting just as those do who have known each other for half an hour, or less.

So they walked slowly on and on, all unaware apparently that they were instinctively seeking the quiet and lonely avenues of the garden, yet talking the merest commonplace all the while, though drinking in each other's voices and tones, till the groups of promenaders were all left far behind, and the music of the band sounded so faint and distant that the hum of the honey-bees could be heard among the flowers.

Then a silence—a long and awkward pause occurred; they felt that platitudes were failing them, and that they had a lack of words—a lack that is said to prove the deepest love, for where 'there is adoration there is paradise,' and Fotheringhame began to feel much of the old adoration in his heart for Annabelle.

'I have been on a long visit to Mary Montgomerie, at Eaglescraig,' said the latter, after a pause, during which she became very pale. 'She would insist upon me coming to

Edinburgh with her; but the season here is nearly over, and I go back to mamma.'

'In Perthshire?'

'In Perthshire,' she repeated mechanically.

'Near where the silver birches overhang the Tay?' he asked with a caressing smile.

'Yes—and very soon,' said she, turning as if to retire.

'But not before our ball,' said he eagerly. 'You accepted our invitation?'

'Mary pressed me to do so,' she replied, colouring; 'and now we must hasten back to her and Mrs. Garth, for we are quite losing all that lovely music of Gounod's.'

'Stay one moment—do bear with me,' said he in an agitated voice.

'I do not understand,' she began falteringly, and then paused, yet looking him fully, firmly, and sadly in the eyes; 'have you aught to say to me?'

'So we meet again face to face, after all these changeful years, Annabelle!'

'I am simply Miss Erroll to you, Captain Fotheringhame.'

'I am only Lieutenant Fotheringhame now. If you remember the past——'

'Could I forget it?' she asked with sparkling eyes, while nervously twirling her parasol upon her shoulder, by its handle.

'Then pardon it, I pray you,' he urged in a voice which more than one woman had found it difficult to resist.

'Who is it that says, "Flowers and love have but a season"?' she asked, with a little bitterness in her usually sweet tone.

'Annabelle!'

'I repeat to you, sir, that you must know me as Miss Erroll. I have been thoughtless in coming so far from my friends.'

'I am wrong in forcing my society upon you,' said he sadly; 'but that is a matter easily amended. In wronging you, as I did, dearest Annabelle, I wronged myself, and have suffered deeply accordingly.'

'Our meeting to-day has been—on both sides, unavoidable,

Captain Fotheringhame. Let us return—if it is the best way to spare you further pain.'

She spoke very calmly and deliberately, yet it cost her a terrible and painful effort. She knew that she loved him still; she felt even the eloquence of his silence, if such a term can be used, and now dared not lift her eyes to meet his gaze.

'Annabelle,' said he again, and took her hand in his; then a quiver passed over her delicate form, but the proud girl accorded no other sign as yet of the power he still possessed over her. 'Do you despise me—do you hate me?'

'Hate you—despise you?—why use language so strong? Oh no, no, Leslie, far from either—far from either!' she exclaimed, as if her heart would burst, and tears welled up in her dark blue eyes.

Then the artificial barrier himself had raised between them seemed to give way, and he told her in the tenderest and most earnest of words how fondly he loved her still.

'Let us not cast away the chance of reconciliation that God in his great kindness has accorded us, Annabelle,' he urged pathetically; 'as I loved you first, I love you now—nay, a thousandfold more, for I have learned the value of the heart with which I so cruelly trifled; and now, I pray you—I beg of you to be my wife, Annabelle, my wife!'

She shook her head, and withdrew her hand.

'Is it to be thus?' he said sadly, but not reproachfully.

She made no reply, but kept her long lashes down and her soft eyes fixed on the gravelled path.

'Let us be now, as we were then, in the sweet summer days, when the silver birches cast their shadows on the Tay; and let us forget my folly, my wickedness—all that estranged me from your loving heart and divided us, Annabelle, when that fair and artful woman of the world, Blanche Gordon, cast her meshes about me.'

'And must I believe that you have loved me all these years, and love me still?' she asked softly, and with infinite tenderness of tone.

'God alone knows how tenderly, deeply and reproachfully, Annabelle!'

'But who knows how you might act if she came with her beauty and her meshes again?' asked Annabelle, who was smiling now.

'Do not be pitiless to me; and as for her—that woman—she is married, so, Annabelle——'

'Hush—we are interrupted!'

They suddenly found themselves environed by groups of idlers, and among others came Mrs. Garth, with Mary and Cecil, all of whom Leslie Fotheringhame would have wished very far away—at least on the cone of Arthur's Seat—at that precise moment.

Face to face again—at last, after all—after all—with Leslie Fotheringhame, Annabelle was thinking; his smile, his voice and presence, were fast bringing back the old and seemingly buried, yet never forgotten, love, to thrill her heart and every pulse as in the bygone time!

Her memory, her whole soul seemed to go back more vividly to those hours which neither he nor she had ever forgot, and now, whilst listening to his voice, she seemed to be out in the bright summer sunshine on the rippling waters of the glassy Tay, in his handsome boat with its crimson velvet cushions; she heard the plash of the sculls, the voices of the birds among the graceful silver birches; she saw the dragon-flies again whizz past and the brown trout leap from the azure stream; and he too was in dreamland, and seemed to hear *her* voice, as when he first heard it singing:

'Love me always, love me ever,
Said a voice low, sad and sweet;
Love me always, love me ever,
Memory will the words repeat.'

So they parted happily, these two, with hopes to meet again, at least once, before the all-important night of the regimental ball, now close at hand.

* * * * * *

That some mysterious change had come over the once nonchalant Leslie Fotheringhame, was soon apparent to the entire mess.

'What the dickens is up now?' said Dick Freeport to Falconer, on this subject; 'I am sure there is a woman in the case; and I am sure that fellow never had a love affair since he joined the regiment, or sought peril by imploring Maud to come into the garden.'

'All the cause of his being more hardly hit now, Dick,' said Falconer, laughing.

'If it is the case it will be a horrible pity!' said Freeport, as he shut his pet and carefully coloured meerschaum up in its crimson velvet case with an angry snap. '"Of all the wonderful things, and there are many," says Sophocles in one of his choruses; "but none more wonderful than man."'

'Except woman, Dick, why didn't the old Athenian add,' said Cecil, laughing; 'so be assured there is a woman at the bottom of this change in Fotheringhame.'

'Shall we have her at the ball?'

'Most probably, so don't forget your magic ring with the blue stone, Dick; but you'll be hooked by a penniless girl some day, Dick!'

'A pity that will be, as manna does not fall from heaven now; but——the fact is,' continued the latter, still pursuing his surmises on the changed habits and bearing of Fotheringhame, 'that matrimony spoils a fellow for the service on one hand, and on the other, one can't think of bringing a tenderly nurtured and high-bred lady into the meagre surroundings, and rough and round of barrack life.'

'Of course not, Dick,' replied Falconer; and yet—young though he was—he was not without his new day-dreams of a graceful and dove-like girl—of Mary Montgomerie—with tender smiling eyes and white hands, sitting opposite to him in that dingy barrack room, with its plain appurtenances.

But Mary was an heiress, and to wed and bring her there would involve open war with her guardian, and too probably the loss of her inheritance!

'Would I had never seen her!' thought he; 'and yet—yet how vague and empty now would life be without her!'

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FRUITLESS TASK.

PRIOR to all this, Sir Piers had taken poor little Mary seriously to task in person.

She was full of her own fond, happy thoughts, and in her own peculiar sanctum or boudoir, when the general, influenced no doubt by some recent remarks of Hew, came in looking black as a thunder-cloud—as black, at least, as he ever could find it in his brave old heart to be with her; and here she was queen, for her boudoir was her pet place in the Edinburgh mansion.

The walls were silver-grey, picked out with bouquets of roses. There were delicate cretonne hangings to match, and funny little black and gold chairs with crimson satin cushions; wood-brackets from Switzerland, and all manner of pretty china things, including porcelain pugs of all sorts and sizes; and here she received him with that charming, coaxing air, which no one could resist, and Sir Piers, perhaps, least of all.

She knew that a lecture was coming, and on what subject, too; thus she was a little nervous, and her pretty dimples came and went, so fast!

It never occurred to Sir Piers that there was gross selfishness in thus seeking to control Mary, and to absorb her fortune into the exchequer of the future baronets of Eaglescraig; though he certainly deemed that he was fully justified in preventing another family mesalliance, and with a nameless gamester.

'Give way to the whim of a girl!' he thought; 'no—no; I shall not be a chicken-hearted fool in my old age!'

'You have been out and abroad again, I understand, and without Mrs. Garth, Mary,' he began, while caressing her head, as she seated herself on a low stool by his side.

'I am close on twenty, and surely old enough to be trusted out of sight now!' said Mary, laughing.

'Hew says no—when that fellow is about.'

'Hew forgets himself!' said she, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders; 'I shall soon reach my twenty-first birthday, dearest grand-uncle, and surely then I shall be my own mistress,' she added, laughing.

To the general she had ever looked up in a sweet, grave, old-fashioned and childlike manner that gave him great power over her, but this he felt was, somehow, passing away. He felt some sympathy for her too, for the human heart is, perhaps, the only part of us that does not grow old with years; but he deemed that he had a duty to do, and heard her now with uneasiness, as he withdrew his hand from her head that nestled on his knee.

'Even in your twenty-first year, child, you will not be independent of me,' he said; 'I have still a control over your fortune, if I fail to control your future.'

'I care not for it!' said she, pouting.

'You know not what you possess, and therefore know not what you would lose; thus I am anxious—more than ever—to lose no time in transferring you and your heritage to the care of a husband I can trust.'

'Meaning the inevitable Hew!' she exclaimed, with a little angry laugh.

'Precisely, girl; I am proud to have an inheritor of our own blood, to my family honours, which, but for him, would pass away. If my poor Piers had only lived——'

'I would to Heaven he had!' sighed Mary, with all her heart.

'You tell me, Mary, that when of age you will be the mistress of your own actions. True. You never talked to me in this way before,' he continued, raising his voice and starting to his feet; 'but I tell you, that if you dare to countenance that fellow Falconer——'

'Oh, uncle, don't break my heart by talking thus!'

'Stuff! hearts don't break, though bones do. Let there be no clandestine correspondence, still less any meetings; but I trust to your honour, Mary—I trust to your honour, child.'

She blushed deeply, painfully, for she had an appointment with Cecil that very afternoon. She remained silent, and Sir Piers interpreted her silence his own way.

He knew that they must inevitably meet at the ball given by the regiment, and for himself to be at that especial ball was, he deemed, a duty he owed to the old corps; so, as for the chances of Mary and Falconer meeting, he would ensure that it would only be as strangers in a crowded ball-room.

'Yes, Mary,' he resumed, 'I trust to your honour, that you will keep this fortune-hunter at a distance.'

'I do believe, uncle—nay, I am certain of it,' she said, in a pretty and coy, yet half-petulant manner, 'that Captain Falconer would marry me whether I had money or not. Oh how I wish I were without it!'

'Indeed!' said he, with a cynical smile; 'for a commercial age, your ideas, my dear, are—to say the least of them—rather peculiar.'

'Now, you dear old pet, I wish you would say no more on this subject,' said Mary, glancing anxiously at a clock.

'Why?'

'Because, grand-uncle, I don't want to marry anyone, and, any way, I will never commit the sin—for such it would be—of marrying one I do not, and never can, love—there!'

'Meaning our Hew?'

'Yes, *your* Hew.'

'Don't be silly, Mary,' persisted the old man; 'you must and *shall* marry Hew, and there is an end of it!'

'But I have given my promise,' began Mary, feeling weary and desperate.

'Promise, to Captain Falconer? The devil you have! Did he dare exact one?'

'Oh no, no!'

'How then?'

'It came about somehow,' said Mary, as her fitful colour came and went.

'Did you promise—the devil, I'll explode!—to—to—marry him?' asked the general, with his back against the mantelpiece.

'No.'

'What the deuce then?'

'To love him—and him only,' said Mary, piteously, softly, and in a low voice, ending in a little nervous laugh.

'And all this has come of my own folly at Eaglescraig! damme, I'll—I'll—choke!' added the general, pale with anger, and feeling awkwardly conscious of the futility of it, with a genuine and honest fear of the future, through his unjust ideas of Cecil Falconer's character.

'Dear old grand-uncle, you have been more than a father to me, ever since I was a tiny dot, just *so* high,' said Mary, holding a little white hand about six inches from the carpet; 'and you must pardon me for all this—for Cecil does so love me,' she urged with tears, 'most tenderly and truly.'

'Folly—folly, all! has life, has position, no other claim on you than that? One born of such lineage as ours,' he continued, vaulting on his hobby-horse, 'requires to consider matters deeply. Disobey me, and I hand over your fortune to Hew; it shall never be made ducks and drakes of by a gambler and adventurer! By your father's will (how often am I to tell this?) it is absolutely in my power to disinherit you if you wed without my consent.'

'A most cruel and illegal will!'

'Devised to save you from yourself, and with a strange prevision of that which was to come.'

'Unjust! why should the dead be so loth to lose their grasp on, their power over, the living?'

'Your father's great dread was fortune-hunters, lest you should be sought—as Falconer seeks you—for your money. Moreover, if this young fellow really loves you, child, he ought to think more of your happiness than daring to seek your hand.'

'Daring?'

'Yes, I say so, considering his origin! You are a romantic little goose! But girls in your position must not think of men in his.'

'Were you not a captain once?' asked Mary softly.

'Yes, and a jolly ensign too; but then, as now, I was Piers Montgomerie of the Eaglescraig! My darling Mary, you are the apple of my old eye, and I should like to see you safe and sound under Hew's protection, ere the last bugle sounds for me, and summons me away to the Land of the Leal; Hew, save yourself, is the nearest to me in blood now that my Piers is gone, finding his grave I know not where—know not where!' he added in a broken voice, as he recalled the real or fancied, but terrible vision he had seen years ago now. 'If money can bring happiness you and Hew should certainly have something very like it,' said he, returning to the charge.

'We should be very, very miserable—at least I should—with all our united wealth.'

'Tut, tut! how much more miserable would you be without it?' asked the general; 'and yet, sooth to say, pet Mary, I shall give you even to Hew grudgingly.'

'Why?' asked Mary hopefully.

'Because,' said the old man, with great tenderness, drawing her head into his neck, 'then you will be for ever, not mine as you are now, little one, but another's! Where Hew goes, you will go; our old life will be gone; a new one will open to you, and I shall be a lonely, old, old man, lonely as when, years ago, I lost Piers!'

'But I am not yet married to Hew,' said Mary, kissing both his withered cheeks, from which the red tan of the Indian sun had long since vanished.

So there was a kind of loving armistice between them for the present; but all the general had said against Cecil increased Mary's loathing of Hew, a loathing that took the place of the toleration with which she had hitherto accepted, not his peculiar mode of courtship, but the mere fact of a residence with him inthe same family circle.

And now, as she recalled all Hew's scandalous hints and rumours, she remembered the mutual impression which she and Annabelle shared at Eaglescraig, that by the expression of his face, the young subaltern Falconer *had* a history; and yet she loved him not the less because, like Quentin in Scott's 'Ayrshire Tragedy,' he was:

> 'A young man, gentle-voiced and gentle-eyed,
> Like one whom all the world had frowned on.'

So the moment Mary was left to herself, she put on a thick Shetland veil, which very effectively concealed her lovely little face, and set forth in haste to hold a certain tryst; thus the worthy old general's task had proved as yet a very fruitless one.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE REGIMENTAL BALL.

THERE is so close a family likeness among regimental balls in their general details, that we need scarcely describe that of the Cameronians, the chief importance of it to our story being the events that came of it.

All Edinburgh said it would be 'the ball of balls,' and beat those given a month before by the Dragoon Guards and Royal Archers. The officers were, of course, all dancing men, and there were few or no married ones to throw 'cold water' on the extravagances of the rest. It was held in the Music-hall and Assembly-room, two magnificent saloons connected by a stately vestibule, a place generally well patronised as a promenade between the dances. Each of these halls is about a hundred feet in length, and the first-named, on these occasions, is usually set apart for waltzes alone; here was the band of the regiment, in the lofty orchestra, under the guidance of Herr von Humstrumm, while a fashionable quadrille band was in the gallery of the Assembly-room, which has one of the finest floors in Europe.

A guard of honour, a hundred strong, under Captain Acharn, occupied the entrance to receive duly the commander-in-chief, Sir Piers, and other general officers; trophies of arms, shields, and claymores, the grouped banners of extinct Scottish regiments from the castle armoury, a double avenue of azaleas and myrtles, foliage and Chinese lanterns, with jets of perfumed water, spouting and sparkling in marble and alabaster basins, all testified to the good taste of Cecil Falconer and the ball-committee, who were there in 'full puff,' to receive the guests, who were now arriving as fast as the carriages could set them down at the east and west *portes-cochère.*

Yellow banners, with the trophies of the regiment, drooped over the staircases; 'Egypt' with the sphinx, 'Corunna,' 'China' with the fiery dragon, and lastly, 'Abyssinia'; and ever and anon the grand and inspiriting crashes of military music swept through the double halls. Kilted officers from the Highland depôt battalions, in various tartans; gentlemen in Highland dresses, Hussars and Lancers, made gay the scene. And the costumes of the ladies, the result of many an anxious consultation with mammas and *modistes* as to what would be prettiest and most effective, completed a scene in which a great amount of feminine loveliness and grace was not wanting.

In the vestibule, the young second lieutenants were flying hither and thither, supplying the ladies with enamelled programmes; the rooms were crowded by a glittering throng, and already the dancing had begun, when the voice of Acharn, calling the guard to attention, and the clatter of their rifles as they came to the 'present,' announced the arrival of Sir Piers and his party, and Falconer felt his heart give a responsive leap.

Roused and inspired by the music, the regimental trophies and familiar badges, and by all his congenial surroundings, the old general looked so bright and happy and he seemed to grow so young again that Hew, in his impatience to succeed him, might have thought that the Parcæ—if he ever heard of them, which is doubtful—were forgetting to shorten his span.

Smiling blandly on all, with all his medals and orders glittering on his gallant old breast, in full uniform, with sash and belt of gold, he moved through the brilliant throng, with Mary —Mary seeking for one face only—leaning on his arm; and he accorded even a pleasant bow to Cecil, as the latter hurried to his place in the dance with a tall and handsome girl, having arranged that Dick Freeport and Mary should be their *vis-à-vis*.

Once or twice as the night wore on, Mrs. Garth, from her place among the chaperons, detected a shadow cross the general's face, and knew that the sight of the familiar 'number,' the trophies and the uniforms, brought back to memory many a long-vanished face, and among them, doubtless, that of his only son.

Circumstanced as they were, Cecil felt all the mortifying absurdity of not putting his name even once on Mary's card, and permitting others to fill it—a rapid process; but there was a nameless sweetness in the conviction of the secret understanding that existed between them, and that she had specially implored him not to ask her. The general's alternate fits of kindness and severity, and his quick and impetuous temper, worried her. In his household he was absolute, or had all the desire to be so; and thus, with all her love and respect for him, a steady emotion of utter rebellion was gathering in Mary's heart; and when she saw Cecil at the ball, she resolved that it would go hard with her if, by some little manœuvring, they did not achieve one dance together.

Yet her card was filled fast, as she had passed through the vestibule—the whole garrison fighting gallantly to get their names inscribed upon it—and she was overwhelmed with petitions for dances more than she could accord. All the subs had come to the ball prepared to fall in love with her; and, as Dick Freeport said, they were in duty bound to do so.

The dark dress of Mary—perhaps a curious one for a ball—black tulle, gracefully trimmed with ears of silver wheat, made the pure delicacy of her complexion, her white shoulders, round, polished and snowy arms, bare from above the dimpled

elbow, all more startlingly fair. She had a complete suite of diamond and pearl ornaments. Even to her lover's eyes, she looked more than usually lovely; there was a tender flush on her soft cheeks, and purest pleasure sparkled in her soft face, as she swept round in the waltz with Fotheringhame, who was whispering to her of Cecil; and her lithe form seemed full of firm, yet delicate, strength and vigour.

'Beg pardon,' said Hew, who was no waltzer, but had ventured on one round dance with Annabelle Erroll, presuming on her good nature, and after canoning against several exasperated Lancers and others, finally did so against Falconer; 'a gay scene,' he added breathlessly.

'Hope you will enjoy yourself,' was Cecil's commonplace reply to Hew, in whose eyes, even at that moment, he could read deep and defiant hostility, but partially veiled by a well-bred smile.

Remembering their gambling experiences, Acharn, a grim, dark officer, who had now dismissed the guard and taken his place among the dancers, would have opposed the invitation of Hew to the ball; but Falconer, loth to put a slight upon the general, and supposing that he had nothing personally to fear in his presence, enclosed a card to his would-be rival, and hence his appearance on the night in question.

He was disposed to be silent and sulky—silent in consequence of a total absence of ideas; and sulky, because of Mary's too apparent happy preoccupation, and her succession of brilliant partners. Most—if not all—of the Cameronians were as good performers on a well-waxed floor as at anything else that is manly, and, as we have already hinted, the floor of the Edinburgh Assembly-room is simply the perfection of what that for a ball should be.

'What a cub that fellow Hew is!' said Fotheringhame to Cecil in passing, with Annabelle on his arm, her pale blue costume becoming her light blonde beauty well. 'Can it be possible,' he whispered to her, 'that such a girl as your friend can be capable of marrying one man while loving another—

marrying this Hew Caddish Montgomerie while loving Cecil Falconer ?'

'I should hope not.'

'But women are such strange creatures !'

'Men are stranger still,' she retorted, with a bright smile; 'but here comes our odious Hew—and I promised him this waltz.'

'He imposes on your good-nature; bother the fellow !'

'Our dance, I think,' said Hew, lounging up.

'Number seven,' said Annabelle, affecting to consult her card, while Fotheringhame gave him an impatient stare, for his dislike of Hew was great.

'How handsome your cousin Miss Montgomerie is,' said he.

'She is full of goodness of heart and common sense too,' added Annabelle.

'I hope she will prove a girl of very *un*common sense,' said Fotheringhame.

'In what way ?' asked Hew.

'By preferring a Cameronian to any other man,' replied Fotheringhame with perfect coolness; and Annabelle laughed to see the gleam that shot athwart the eyes of Hew, as he swept away with her into the dance, to begin a series of 'canons' again, and elicit remarks of wrath under many a moustache.

'I don't know what your plans are, old fellow,' said Fotheringhame to Cecil, as their eyes mutually followed Mary, admiringly, through the maze of waltzers, 'but, if I were in your place, I would write to Sir Piers, and give him fair warning that I meant to use every means to win his ward.'

'Nay, Leslie; I have already won her,' interrupted Falconer, a little triumphantly.

'Well—all the better; and if the girl loved me as she loves you, and as Annabelle tells me, I would have her in spite of all the guardians in Scotland !'

But there was no answering smile in the face of Cecil, who remembered how his last visit to the house of Sir Piers ended,

and the summary manner in which the old man rang the bell to have him shown out.

And now for a time he remained among the crowd of men—the inert or uninterested—who hovered about the doorway, critically watching the dancers, and he heard Mary again and again praised as she swept past in a succession of waltzes. The genuine praises of some delighted him; but there were occasional off-hand remarks that made him inclined to punch more than one head.

'Not a bad-looking girl at all,' lisped a Lancer; 'wish she wouldn't lay on the powder so freely, though.'

'Powder!' said Bickerton of that Ilk, a well-browned young fellow in the blue-and-gold-laced uniform of the Ayrshire Yeomanry, 'the devil a pinch of powder is there!'

'By Jove! to my mind, her dress is very *chic*. Regent Street couldn't turn out a better! Who the deuce is she?' asked another lounger.

'Oh! the daughter of Sir Piers Montgomerie,' replied some one whose information was vague; 'an old general officer—no end of money, and has refused no end of eligibles, and non-eligibles, alike.'

'Get me an introduction, won't you?'

'Well, perhaps—but her card has been full no doubt an hour ago.'

'Who is that swivel-eyed fellow that hangs about her?'

'Her intended, people say—don't like the fellow; he once played me a fishy trick about a horse.'

'I have certainly seen a face like that girl's before,' resumed the Lancer, eyeing Mary through his glass.

'Perhaps—but you haven't seen many like it,' said Dick Freeport. 'I am lucky enough to have booked her for two waltzes.'

'Great success, this regimental hop of yours!'

Amid the painful doubts of his own position, his hopes and his fears, Cecil saw with pleasure how radiantly happy his friend Fotheringhame and Annabelle Erroll were, enjoying the

ball and their own society to the fullest extent; and sooth to say, though Blanche Gordon, the girl who had 'thrown him over,' was present, and looking very queenly in her costume and her loveliness, he seemed to have eyes only for Annabelle; and as his arm encircled her there was a depth of emotion in her tender blue eyes when their gaze met his, that called up many a loving thought, and, though they were silent, led both to remember the scenes of their past, upon the shining river, when the boat glided under the silver birches and the water-lilies floated by her side—scenes to be visited together, as they hoped, again.

But, as if there could be no perfect brightness without a shadow, no perfect happiness without some alloy, it chanced that when seated together in the vestibule, for coolness, there occurred an event which—though Annabelle thought little, perhaps, of it then—she had bitter cause to remember afterwards.

A lady, closely veiled, passed quickly near them, after descending from the gallery usually occupied by servants and privileged spectators.

She dropped a card-case or purse, and Fotheringhame hastened to restore it to her, on which, with a low voice, she thanked him by name, involuntarily as it would seem.

'Why are you here to-night?' he asked severely.

'To see—you.'

'How rash—how foolish—go home!'

She hurried away, and on Fotheringhame rejoining Annabelle, the latter could see that he had suddenly become very pale.

'Do you know that—person?' she asked, while slowly fanning herself, and fixing her upturned eyes upon him.

'Why do you ask, dearest Bella?' said he, as if to gain time for thought.

'Because she seemed to know you, and called you Leslie.'

'Surely not; but so many people know me—the world is such a small place. I know her to be very unhappy, and this

gay scene is the last place where I would expect to see her, even as a spectator.'

He spoke with perfect deliberation and confidence now, but failed to inspire his listener with the latter, as she read a sudden and settled gloom in his eyes.

The strange woman—a lady evidently—admitted that she had come hither to see *him*. Why? Then he had desired her to 'go home.' Where was her home? Who was she? And why did this chance meeting make him so *distrait*?

'Our dance now, darling,' he whispered, drawing her hand through his arm. 'One of Schubert's waltzes; old Humstrumm greatly affects Schubert,' he added with rather a sickly smile. But this little episode so startled Annabelle, that the task of getting her fair face and soft complexion into 'society trim' again cost her an effort; and ere they could get among the waltzers in the Music-hall, a strange commotion there attracted the attention of both, as it did that of everyone: so the cause thereof deserves a chapter to itself, for Fotheringhame was struck with horror and dismay to see his friend Cecil Falconer borne past him to a retiring-room, reeling and almost senseless, in the arms of three officers of different regiments!

What had happened?

CHAPTER XXVI.

HEW'S TRIUMPH.

PRIOR to this startling event, the reels, usually a great feature in such balls at Edinburgh, had been attracting the attention of Mary, who did not join in them; and the long line of more than a hundred dancers facing each other, presented a gay spectacle, from the number of uniforms, clan tartans, and occasionally the green uniform and great gold epaulettes of the Scottish body-guard, worn by some of the male performers.

The 'Cameronian Rant' was struck up by the orchestra in the Assembly-room, and old Mrs. Garth, who deemed herself

quite as much a part of the Cameronians as the adjutant or the big drum, and who had been vibrating, bubbling, and brimming over with pleasure all night, now felt her satisfaction culminate when the aged Sir Piers, with the courtly gallantry of the old school, led her forth as his partner, and looked round in vain for Hew and Mary, as a *vis-à-vis*, whose place was speedily supplied by Dick Freeport and a young lady whose interest he was exciting on the subject of his ring with the blue stone.

The reel over, the general had retreated breathlessly to his place, where he proceeded to button-hole the commander-in-chief—another old fogie like himself; and they were deep in reminiscences of the land of palms and punkahs, tigers and precious stones, when Cecil, discovering Mary with Annabelle and Fotheringhame in one of those flirtation nooks which are to be found in the corners of the Music-hall at such times, approached, and whispering that Hew had disappeared, and the general was busy, suggested that they might have one waltz together, as the double-rooms always make a total confusion in the mutual engagements.

She murmured something, mechanically, about the heat of the room, the crowd, and so forth; his arm went around her; thrillingly her little hand returned the pressure of his own, having to the full as much effect upon him as any words she might have uttered; and in a moment they were lost amid the whirling crowd of hundreds of waltzers. Her great self-control nearly gave way in the delight of dancing with Cecil, 'under the temptation,' which, as Wilkie Collins has it, 'no woman can resist—the temptation of touching the man she loves.'

Thus the soft pressure of the hand, which silently said so much, was mutually returned again and again, as Cecil guided her unerringly amid the mazy circles, till she paused, palpitating, blushing, and half-reclining breathlessly on his shoulder.

'I have not had such a waltz to-night, Cecil,' she whispered; 'so delightful, I mean.'

'Nor I, darling—one turn more!' And away they went

again, but at a slower pace, which enabled them to converse at intervals.

They were not unseen, however; now, for Hew, who had been fraternising with one of the pretty waitresses who superintended the luxurious supper-tables in the wings of the hall, was watching them with a heart full of growing hatred of Falconer; he longed to do him a mischief of some kind—vaguely, savagely, and Mary, too, for violating thus the express orders of her guardian. And how radiantly (disgustingly, he thought) happy they looked!

'I'll mar his wooing, and more!' muttered Hew, who possessed in an eminent degree that quality which is to be largely found in the least intellectual natures—low cunning.

As if she had some intuition of the *mal occhio* under which they were, she whispered:

'Hew has some deep scheme of mischief *in petto* against us—I am assured by quiet smiles I have read in his face to-night.'

'He is gone, I think.'

'I hope so; he is so cruel, coarse, and unscrupulous—one, in short, to beware of.'

'Don't bother about Hew, darling; I fear more Sir Piers—and his never consenting.'

'I don't care for what Sir Piers says,' whispered the dear voice: 'I can never, never care for anyone but you, Cecil; I'll wait for you till I'm a hundred.'

At this cheerful prospect he pressed her little gloved hand again.

'I'm sure you'll wait as long as I—but oh, Cecil, I'm so wretched at times.'

But the bright *mignonne* face that smiled back to his didn't look wretched a bit, and in the glittering crowd at times, through which they were sweeping to the intoxicating crashes of the regimental band, while with each other thus, they felt as much alone as if the world contained no other couple than themselves.

'Is not love a thing worth living for, Mary, even for its own sake?'

'It is indeed, Cecil!' whispered Mary, with her brightest smile.

'A dream that comes, I am sure, truly and purely, but once in a lifetime.'

'And love, it is said, works miracles.'

'I wish it would work one with that dear old fogie, the general! When last he spoke to me it was somewhat like the stern parent in Allan-a-Dale, for he literally

'"Lifted the latch, and bade me begone."'

His arm was still encircling her; his left hand pressed her right; her cheek half sunk on his shoulder, their breath mingling as they swept on, intoxicated alike by the measure of the dance and the music of Strauss; in their souls unmindful of all ways and means—of marriage and the general; of houses; of equipages; of society and the world—unmindful of all, save that they loved each other, and were together alone—alone even in that brilliant throng, till Mary could spin no more; and he led her well-nigh breathless to the most sequestered seat he could find, between two great vases of flowers near the curtained gallery, under which some of the supper-tables were, and his own servant, Tommy Atkins, who was in attendance there, promptly brought them some iced champagne.

On the third finger of her left hand, Mary had a ring that Cecil had placed there—a diamond cluster, and which she was fond of drawing off her glove to contemplate, with a self-conscious aspect and tender smile—a ring unnoticed by all save Annabelle, who now wore a nearly precisely similar emblem.

She had drawn off her glove now, and as she sat fanning herself, while Cecil bent over her chair whispering little nothings, dear only to themselves, Hew Montgomerie, unseen by both, came near.

We have told in an earlier chapter that Hew was a 'good hater'—one precisely after the heart of the great Lexicographer—and how he had made a vow to revenge himself on Falconer

—a vow all the deeper for being an unuttered one; and the time to redeem that vow had now come!

Hew's hand passed for a moment lingeringly over Cecil's goblet of champagne. A close observer might have remarked that Hew's hand suddenly opened and shut, and that as he did so the wine frothed up anew and curiously; but no close observer was there, and Hew withdrew some paces, and laughed his noiseless, joyless laugh, as he watched Cecil, while replying smilingly and fondly to some laughing remark of Mary, put his hand to the goblet, lift it from the table, and finish its contents at a draught, like a heated and thirsty young dancer as he was.

Hew then withdrew from their vicinity; but all that followed, followed fast indeed!

Cecil became deadly pale, and an expression of agony came into his face. The lights in the domed roof above, and the figures of the whirling dancers below, seemed to multiply *ad infinitum;* the music sounded as if receding to a vast distance; the four corners of the hall seemed to be in swift pursuit of each other, as if it revolved on an axis: he read a strange expression of utter dismay in the face and dilated eyes of Mary, who had started from her seat; he made a wild, but futile clutch at the table to support himself, while a half-stifled cry escaped him, and he fell with a crash on the waxed floor, when a crowd instantly gathered round him, and voices in alarm rose on every side.

'Make way there—poor fellow taken ill—the heat—the ventilation here is horrible!' cried one.

'Stand back—stand back, please—air!' said an officer of Lancers authoritatively.

'Lift him up,' cried another; 'he has fainted.'

'Screwed as an owl, you mean,' said a voice there was no mistaking.

'Silence, sir!' exclaimed Captain Acharn sternly.

But Hew, with his cruel cold smile, and an ill-suppressed gleam in his parti-coloured eyes, thought,

'If there is any nonsense still in her head about this fellow, surely it must end for ever now!'

So Cecil, in a state of utter insensibility, was borne away by the hands of kind comrades, placed in a carriage, and conveyed home to his quarters by Acharn and Dick Freeport, who were in an intense state of concern and bewilderment; yet 'all went merry as a marriage bell' at the regimental ball, and the dancing continued till the morning sun began to redden the castle towers and Arthur's rocky cone; for hundreds in the rooms knew nothing of the matter; a few red-coats were suddenly missed—some engagements broken—and that was all.

Mary danced no more that night, of course—or for the remainder of the morning, rather—and all that passed seemed a horrible dream, in which, however, Hew, singular to say, bore no part as yet in her mind, notwithstanding the significance of her words of warning during the dance. No suspicion so utterly monstrous as the reality was likely to occur to a mind like hers.

The general and his party retired. He was horribly perplexed and shocked by an event so utterly out of his ken and experience, and he could recall no parallel case in all the long course of his military career—an officer taken *thus* in a ball-room; for of course, such is human nature, that the worst construction was instantly put upon it.

'Hah!' muttered Hew, as the carriage bowled through the empty but magnificent streets to the westward; 'this comes of taking too much cognac with his soda-water. He'll be drummed out of society, and the regiment too, I suppose, for this,' he added with a grin to Mrs. Garth, who sat back in a corner of the carriage and sobbed sorrowfully.

Finding that no answer was made to his ill-natured remarks, Hew said again:

'This Falconer used to laugh at the colonel's jokes and toady to his betters; but, by Jove, he won't have a chance of laughing at the colonel's jokes after this!'

'Silence, Hew,' said the general grimly; 'but I am thinking more of the honour of the regiment than of him.'

'She will either marry me now quietly, or she will *not*,' thought Hew triumphantly and pitilessly; 'if she does not, I suppose her tin will come to me anyhow, thanks to her father's will and this old fool, Sir Piers—shame to call the old fellow a fool, though, for being so deuced friendly to me!' he added mentally, with a hiccough.

It has been said truly, that there are times, which come into the lives of some of us, in which the agonies of years are compressed into a few minutes—yea, it may be a second.

And thus it was with Mary!

Annabelle Erroll had her own cause for secret unhappiness—the strange episode of the closely veiled woman in the vestibule—but at present all her sympathies were absorbed in the great catastrophe of the ball, and the unavailing sorrow of her friend Mary.

CHAPTER XXVII.

'I HAVE COME FOR YOUR SWORD.'

THE mind of Cecil, next forenoon, when he partially awoke, and seemed to grope his way back to life and to the world, was a species of chaos. He was ill, sick, abed in the doctor's hands—too ill to think—too weak to rise. He found himself in his quarters in the castle, and the events of the past night confused themselves grotesquely and hideously with the prosaic features of the apartment in which he lay: the joy and rapture of his being with Mary, mingled with the remembered horror that seemed to envelop him, as darkness descended on his eyes and the ball-room whirled round him, and amid the circles of the dancers, the crash of the music and the murmur of many voices, he fell heavily on the floor, as all sense passed away, and he seemed to sink into a sea!

When he did begin to come round and rouse himself, he was sensible of a hum of voices, and considerable odour of vinegar and of cigars, in his huge room—for a large one it was; and

there were Acharn, Leslie Fotheringhame, and Dick Freeport and the doctor, refreshing themselves with brandy-and-water, talking about the ball and surmising about himself, sympathisingly, and in low tones.

'I cannot comprehend it,' he heard the doctor say; 'a curious case, and not like imbibing too much. He must have eaten or drunk something poisonous at the supper-table. There was no sudden transition from heat to cold—he had undergone no great fatigue or excessive weakness to cause such a fit as overtook him; but I have known strong and healthy persons, abounding in blood, seized with sudden faintings after violent exercise——'

'But, man alive, doctor, Falconer is one of the best round dancers in the regiment,' said Freeport.

'It must have been the closeness of the room,' said Acharn.

'It looks a deuced deal more like half-poisoning,' exclaimed the doctor, with a finger on Cecil's pulse. Then, turning to Falconer's servant, Tommy Atkins, and a hospital orderly who were in attendance, he ordered his hands to be rubbed, and his head to be bathed with brandy, salts to be held to his nostrils, and a little wine, as soon as he could swallow it, to be given him—for he was unwilling to accept the idea that was forcing itself upon him, that Cecil had, perhaps, taken too much champagne over-night; and then he withdrew.

In defiance of the doctor's injunction, which was that he was to lie with a low pillow, Cecil struggled up into a sitting posture and looked rather wildly around him as he greeted his friends.

He felt that he was in a dreadful emergency—a coil—yet in his pale face there was that faint indication of a smile that is sadder by far than none; for he felt that, however well-meaning and attached to him his brother officers were, they were certain to have but *one* fatal suspicion in the matter.

'What on earth has come to you, Falconer, old fellow?' said Fotheringhame. 'I never heard of you getting into a scrape like this, even when a greenhorn, who was fined a dozen

of Moselle for first drawing his sword, or a ditto for the sergeants' mess on first carrying the colours!'

'By Jove! it knocks me into a cocked hat,' added Freeport; 'I can't reason over it—the whole thing seems so unnatural—so horribly unreal! This is a worse scrape than mine with the three daughters of the depôt commandant.'

'There was safety in the trio,' said Acharn.

'Yes—he couldn't marry them all, certainly,' said Fotheringhame, 'though I am not prepared to say that if the law of Scotland permitted it he might have tried to do so.'

'How *can* you fellows jest thus?' said Falconer faintly.

'True—I beg your pardon,' replied Fotheringhame; 'but chaff and fun are such habits with us.'

'I fear that this affair will be no "fun" for me. Have I talked much nonsense, Dick?'

'Well—being screwed—Cecil, you certainly did talk a lot of stuff; but people do that at all times, and even when quite sober.'

Falconer felt his heart sink at the view his best friends were taking of this catastrophe. He felt that he was the victim of some hidden and mysterious circumstance over which he had no control; but how was that to be proved? and he knew that in the chief city of Mrs. Grundy the public always took the worst possible view of everything.

'You do not think—you dare not think,' he exclaimed half-entreatingly and half-defiantly, 'that I forgot my position and the honour of the corps, and took too much wine last night—in uniform and at a public ball too, in presence of the general commanding and all the staff?'

'I fear, my dear Falconer,' said Fotheringhame, 'that it only looks too much like that very mistake.'

'By heavens! I was never near the supper-tables but once—and had but one glass of Moselle!' cried Falconer impetuously.

'But people will be sceptical in such matters,' said Acharn, pulling his long black moustache angrily; 'and from much of

what I heard on parade this morning there is a devil of a row impending.'

'Over me?'

'Yes.'

At that moment there came a single knock smartly on the door, and the adjutant entered with an expression of grave concern on his face. After a few words of kind inquiry, and half apology, he said:

'I am so sorry for you, my poor fellow, but the chief is furious, and, by his order, I have come—for *your sword*.'

The words seemed to sink into Falconer's soul. He knew all this implied, and that, too probably, it was the beginning of his destruction—the beginning of a bitter end!

So his sword was taken away, and he found himself under arrest—but arrest at large, as the adjutant informed him that he was at liberty to take exercise within defined limits, within the barracks, but not to go beyond the barrier-gates of the fortress, and not to quit his room otherwise than in uniform, minus a sword and sash.

All this was not new to him, of course, yet he had listened to the adjutant as one in a dream, and saw him take away the sword. After the departure of this important official—the grand vizier of the colonel—the gravity of the situation became painfully apparent to all, and it may well be supposed there was no more jesting then, and Falconer felt all the horror of the new position.

His mysterious illness seemed to grow worse now; a dreadful ache racked his head; his heart grew heavy as lead, and his spirit seemed to die under this disgrace and all it implied and all it imperilled, and as yet he had not the most remote idea that he was the victim of a wretch's revenge; thus the well-meant efforts of his friends to rouse him and inspire him with the hope that he would yet get over it—that all would be explained—that all would be well in the end, and so forth, were made in vain.

Dick Freeport, Leslie Fotheringhame, and the entire corps

were bewildered by the catastrophe, and poor Tommy Atkins, who doted on his master, was in despair—got very tipsy on the head of it, and had given him, therefore, three days in the black hole, to contemplate the unstability of human—and more especially of military—affairs.

Events followed each other fast now; and when again the adjutant most reluctantly visited him, it was to announce that he was in orders for a general court-martial, and to furnish him, by the colonel's instructions, with a copy of the charge preferred against him, 'for conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman at the ball,' together with a list of the witnesses for the prosecution.

All the bright, youthful, and enthusiastical hopes—the hopes cherished for years; all the visions of glory and honour conjured up on the day he first donned his uniform, were crushed and gone now, like the dear love of yesterday, for the love of Mary had—in one sense—come into his heart but yesterday; and yet, how strong and keen, how tender and true it was!

So bewildered was poor Falconer by his mysterious illness, the sudden giddiness and unconsciousness in the ball-room, and his symptoms since, that he actually began to believe at last, or adopt the idea, based perhaps on the remarks of his medical attendant, that he had been guilty of what was unwillingly imputed to him.

And yet, how *could* it be? Utterly unconscious as he was of Hew's vicinity to him on that occasion, the idea that he had been vulgarly, yea brutally, hocussed, never occurred to his simple mind, though the doctors hinted that he must have partaken of something deleterious.

Apart from his comrades of the mess, there was an intense interest in the regiment for Cecil; the soldiers, and even their wives, paid him surreptitious visits of condolence; and the children of his company, who had been the recipients of so many Christmas-boxes and bonbons, lingered with hushed voices under the windows of his room—the girls curtseying and the

small boys coming to 'attention' and saluting him quite gravely as their fathers would have done; and Cecil felt all this keenly and gratefully.

In the barracks and guard-house, his affairs were under constant and serious consideration, through the medium of much birds'-eye; and among many stories of kindness and generosity, connected with Cecil's popularity among the Cameronians, was one which they recalled prominently now: how, on one occasion, after a long day's march of heat and thirst, far up country in India, when commanding an advanced picket before the position of a hill-tribe, he had found, on visiting his sentinels, one of them, Tommy Atkins, worn with toil, sound asleep —a crime which was death by the Articles of War, if reported.

But instead of making poor Tommy a prisoner with the quarter-guard, he had shouldered his musket and kept the post in person, watching over the sleeping soldier on the one hand and the hill camp on the other, till the movement of armed tribesmen in front compelled him to fire and bring the picket under arms.

He saw less of his chief friend Leslie Fotheringhame than he might otherwise have done, for the time of the latter—despite anxiety for the affair of his friend—was much occupied by Annabelle Erroll, and in dangling after her.

At last there came a day which Cecil never forgot, from the emotions of mortification and humiliation it occasioned him. It was a Thursday—the usual 'march-out' day for the regiment. From his window he watched its departure, with bayonets fixed and colours flying, in heavy marching order, and in all the pride and bravery of the service, while he remained behind a prisoner, disgraced, deprived of his sword and sash, with a terrible ordeal before him, and too probably a doom—to him—worse than death!

And he heard the drums grow fainter and fainter, till their last notes died away in the distance, and he heard only the beating of his heart, that followed them with painful yearning it had never known before.

Anon, when the regiment returned, Freeport told him that when passing the house of Sir Piers Montgomerie, it had been halted in column, when the fine old soldier came out on the balcony and was received with a general salute, which he beheld with swelling heart and glistening eyes, and then he attempted to make a speech, but his voice failed him—yet he made a short one—so short as only to be equalled by that of the Duke of Wellington to the Household Brigade, when, after keeping silence for some time, he said, 'Guards! you know me, and I know you—stand at ease!'

'Was—was Miss Montgomerie on the balcony?' asked Cecil, after a pause.

'No; there was only old Mrs. Garth waving her handkerchief vigorously, and alternately mopping her eyes with it, poor old soul, as she thought, I have no doubt, of old John Garth of our Grenadiers. I thought it strange that the belle of our unlucky ball was not there.'

But Mary had been watching the regiment, sorrowfully, from her own room, and missing an absent face sorely indeed.

To her this was a time of great horror and dismay; each night that she laid her sweet face on the pillow, she thought:

'If I could only waken in the morning to find it all a dream—all a dream!'

But alas! it was a dream from which there was no awakening. Blended with great pity and sorrow, she knew and felt now, in all its intensity, the love she had thought about, read about in romance, but never knew till she had met Cecil Falconer; the love, that is, whether found or not, ever a young girl's day-dream.

To all, save Annabelle Erroll, she had to act the part of apparent unconsciousness of, or indifference to, all that was in progress. Abed, it seemed to her that she heard every hour struck by the adjacent clocks, and yet she must have slept a little, as the memory of more than one torturing or tantalising dream told her.

People, however, do get through everything somehow.

In the petty circle of Edinburgh society, the *malheur* of Falconer spread with many exaggerations, and with much rancour; he was a great bibber, a *vaurien*, and it was not the first time, by many, that he had been in such a scrape; and there was much lifting up of hands and eyes among the self-righteous who abound in the northern city of the Seven Hills.

Mary resolved to avoid hearing aught on the subject of the nine days' wonder; she paid no idle visits, and was at home but to few; yet, as many of the few were connected with the service, the whole affair, the court-martial, and what was certain to come of it, were freely discussed in spite of her.

And he had no one to console him 'up there,' she would think, as she surveyed resentfully the grand old fortress, with its towers, turrets, and black portholes, which seemed to her but as a great trap, or giant lock, barring in Cecil from her and the world. And all her good-natured friends assured her, that the military trial could only end in dismissal, ruin, and disgrace. Would that she could go to him, and see him once again, and assure him that whatever came to pass, she was his own still.

She was tearless and very quiet. She would not even retort upon Hew's bitter exultation over the affair—an exultation which his detestable nature rendered him incapable of concealing. Her sweet face looked blank and white, and nothing seemed to rouse her.

Kind old Mrs. Garth felt intense pity for her.

'Poor darling,' she would say, while caressing her; 'no tears yet—would that I could see you weep!'

'Why?'

'It would at least relieve your heart. You have yet to learn, dearest Mary, that with too many in this world the growth of love is unlike every other growth: it often expands and blooms strongest amid sorrow and gloom and the chill blasts of adversity.'

'I am afraid, Sir Piers,' said Mrs. Garth on one occasion, 'the girl is simply breaking her heart!'

'Simply breaking her fiddlestick!' growled the general, who was terribly worried by the whole situation; 'yet I should not be angry with poor little Mary,' he added in a gentler tone; 'God is very good! He took pity on me, a childless old man, and, seeing an empty corner in my heart, sent her to fill it.'

Mary could hear, incidentally, from time to time, the general in his pure dismay that a Cameronian should cause such *esclandre*, Mrs. Garth acting in his interests, even Annabelle in her sorrow, and not knowing very well what to think (as she had her doubts of mankind in general), all inferring by casual remarks that Falconer was quite unworthy of her—that she had made a lucky escape, and so forth; but they forgot that 'the woman never yet lived who could cast a true love out of her heart, because the object of it was unworthy of her, and that all she can do is to struggle against it in secret;' and poor Mary was no exception to the rest of her sex generally.

'Look a little beyond the present, dear Mary,' said Sir Piers, as he caressed her head, that nestled beside his knee, and passed his old shrivelled hand through her rich brown hair; 'I dare say you think Providence very short-sighted in sweeping out of our circle this interloper, who thought to come between Hew and yourself, a ne'er-do-well, an utter black sheep in birth and bearing!' he added angrily; for in his rage at the probable slur cast on the regiment—*his* regiment—he was pitiless with regard to Cecil, who, for a time, had come between the wind and his nobility; and Mary knew not exactly how Hew, artfully, insidiously, and openly, by turns, had succeeded in influencing Sir Piers against the victim of his own treachery, but she replied simply and firmly, as Cecil's love for her seemed something too sacred and too precious to be referred to so bluntly as it too often was:

'Talk not to me of Hew; had Cecil Falconer never been born, I never could have loved Hew Montgomerie!'

Hew was one of the many in this age of refined civilization, who, though they have no fear of God, have a wholesome fear of the police! Thus, with all his malevolent hatred of Falconer,

he shrank from using a dagger or pistol, even secretly; but he had resorted to a means of revenge more subtle and cruel than either.

The great military influence of Sir Piers might have arrested the tide of ruin that was setting in against Falconer, and might ultimately have been brought to bear upon the president and members of a court so honourable and impartial as a military one; but Sir Piers was enraged by the whole affair, and his mind was so full of it that for a time he ceased even to prose about Central India. Thus, for many reasons patent to the reader, his influence, if used at all, was thrown into the opposite scale; and so Falconer was left to his destiny, an inexorable one, by the *code militaire*.

'Surely it is sharp work, Sir Piers, resorting to a court-martial at once,' said Fotheringhame on one occasion; 'could not your influence with the general commanding——'

'Don't speak of it, sir,' said Sir Piers testily, with a wave of his hand.

'Is there no other resort?'

'None,' replied the other sternly.

'Yet I have heard our lieutenant-colonel tell that when you, Sir Piers, were in his place at the head of the Cameronians, you were less severe on a similar occasion, but of more importance than a ball.'

'What was it?'

'When Lieutenant Piers Montgomerie was placed under arrest.'

The old general blushed scarlet and then grew very pale. The occasion referred to was when the regiment was leaving Edinburgh for the East; he had urged the men to behave soberly and with propriety during their last days in the castle, that all might parade and march forth in perfect order; and nobly did they all respond to the appeal, all save one, his son, who came flushed from some late entertainment to the parade in the early morning, to the great dismay of Sir Piers. A court-martial would have ruined his prospects for life; yet he was

put under arrest, and, some example being necessary, it appeared in orders thus:

'Lieutenant Montgomerie, of the Grenadiers, will in future do duty with one of the battalion companies.'

This was in the days before the Crimea, when to be attached to a flank company was equally advantageous and honourable.

'True, Mr. Fotheringhame; the offender was my own son, Piers,' said the general with much emotion, yet more irritation at the reminiscence; 'but this affair of Captain Falconer took place in the face of the city, as one may say; so let the arrest and charge take their course!'

How the drum for mess jarred on Cecil's ear when he heard it now! Instead of dining at that jovial table, and sharing in the happiness of its social circle, he had his solitary repast brought to him in covered dishes on a salver, the repast he had neither the appetite nor zest to eat, and which he would rather not have seen nor faced, save for acting a part before his servant, Tom Atkins, a sympathetic fellow, however, who could not help thinking that had *he* been seen groggy in public, how much more easily he would have got over it than his luckless captain.

The sweetest and the saddest hours must pass away inexorably, and so the sad hours passed with Cecil Falconer.

Day follows day and night follows night—is not human life made up of these?—but nothing lasts for ever, thank God, was his thought, and the end, be it ever so bitter, comes at last. But bitter as those of Marah seemed now the waters of his life! He felt that Mary and he were parted for ever; that she could be his love no more, and that the day-dream of her could be dreamt over never again!

About this time he received a kind and earnest letter of condolence from old Mr. John Balderstone, who had conceived a great friendship for him at Eaglescraig; but the terms of it served to irritate Cecil, as they too plainly hinted, 'from what Mr. Hew had reported, that on the night in question he had been exhilarated a little too much, perhaps.'

He tore and tossed it away with a malediction; yet old John Balderstone meant well and kindly.

Hew's satisfaction at the progress of events was too great for concealment.

'Screwed as Bacchus at the regimental ball!' he thought to himself; 'and this is the cad who tried to take Mary and her money away from me. By-and-by, we'll kiss and be friends, as the children say, now that *he* is scratched for the running. He'll be doing the "blighted being" style of thing now,' he added aloud to Sir Piers. 'How interesting!—it is quite an idyll, whatever the devil that may be. Or perhaps he'll be going on the boards—back to the old trade of his mother before him! I have known more than one broken-down army fellow who came out quite strong in genteel comedy.'

The general heard and eyed him sternly, but with silence. What would his emotions have been had he fully known *all?*

Hew, however, thinking it would be as well to be out of Edinburgh about this time, took his departure to the country, on pretence of a little fishing; and the eventful day of Falconer's life was close at hand.

On the night before it, to his own surprise, he slept the heavy, yet feverish sleep that follows great tribulation of mind and consequent exhaustion of power; yet not without a dream in which he heard the voice of the adjutant again saying gravely, and with commiseration:

'I have come for your sword.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE COURT-MARTIAL.

ST. GILES'S clock, the castle clock, and on the dials of every other clock, the hands went inexorably round, and the day and the morning of the eventful crisis came inevitably at last, and Cecil put on his beloved full uniform, as his heart told him, perhaps for the last time—but minus his sword and sash!

He look round his humbly furnished barrack-room, with the eye of one who was taking a long farewell of something, and a

heavy sigh escaped his overcharged breast. Leslie Fotheringhame, who was to act as his legal friend in court, pressed his hand, and said in his off-hand way:

'Take courage, my dear friend. Keep up your pecker, old fellow; Marshal Ney's scrape was a worse one than yours.'

Through a crowd of idlers, witnesses and others, who thronged the ante-chambers and bare stone passages, they proceeded towards the mess-room, in which the court, composed of officers of the rank of captain and above it, was being constituted and sworn by the president, and all fully dressed in review order, with their swords and sashes, around a table littered with writing materials and a few volumes of military regulations.

The first incident that jarred on Cecil's nerves was the voice of the president, a cranky old colonel, whose whole life had been passed in sinecure staff appointments, saying:

'Bring in the prisoner!'

And he found himself, after being introduced by Fotheringhame, with whom he sat apart at a writing-table, duly charged with 'conduct unbecoming the character of an officer, in having, on the —— day of ——, 18—,' etc., etc.; to all of which he listened as one in a dream; and still more did it all seem so as the day wore on. How bright the sunshine seemed outside, and how close and dark the ruin within that ill-omened room, which had been so often the scene of hospitality and convivial jollity.

Through the open windows came, as from a distance, the jangle of St. Giles's musical bells, with 'mingling din,' as Scott has it; and their monotony and iteration galled his spirit, and from mere association of ideas he felt certain that he must loath them for ever after.

Of how much Hew Montgomerie was his evil genius, Cecil Falconer knew not, nor had the least suspicion. Yet he looked around the many faces in court more than once, expecting to see his parti-coloured eyes regarding him with exultation; but that worthy was miles away from the spot. Among the spec-

tators he saw many legal men, in black with white ties, who had come up from the Parliament House—the provincial 'gossip shop'—to stare, whisper, and make severe comments, which certainly were sometimes called for; and to draw somewhat invidious comparisons between the modes of administering civil and military law.

When the minds of those who compose any court are fully made up as to the guilt of the prisoner, and know the sentence that must be passed in conformity to certain iron rules laid down by law and custom, the proceedings are usually summary enough, and so it was in the case of Cecil Falconer.

Doubt of his guilt or error there seemed to be none; most of those composing the court had been at the ball in question, and were more or less cognisant of the bewildering catastrophe; but all that Cecil and Leslie Fotheringhame, as his friend and adviser, desired to bring before the listeners, were the simple facts that he had just been dancing—that hence some strange giddiness might have come upon him in consequence; of the wine he had taken but a single glass, as they could easily prove; and they desired to argue these simple points earnestly, in the hope of modifying the opinion of the tribunal, and Fotheringhame wished to put a question to the lieutenant-colonel commanding, as ex-officio prosecutor.

'Stop, sir, please,' said a member of the court—Brevet-Major Rammer of the Royal Artillery, a fiery-eyed little man with grey spectacles and red nose—a man who had crammed at Woolwich, and was up to the ears in military law, though ignorant of all the principles thereof; 'this would seem to be a leading question, and, according to Hough on courts-martial, such questions cannot be allowed.'

On this subject there ensued much difference of opinion, and Major Rammer made some notes thereon with a dry pen.

'Clear the court!' cried the president in consequence, and there was a general exodus of the audience.

'What utter stuff this is!' said Falconer to the adjutant, as

they smoked a cigar outside, while the fourteen members of the court, the president and the deputy-judge advocate, seemed to be all speaking and wrangling at once; and after some twenty minutes' deliberation the court was re-opened, and all the audience trooped in again.

The question was voted 'irregular,' though neither Fotheringhame nor Falconer had stated what it was to have been; so as the former was about to propose another:

'We are here, sir, to try Captain Falconer, not *you*,' said Major Rammer snappishly; 'not you, sir, remember.'

'Of that circumstance I do not require to be reminded,' replied Fotheringhame haughtily; 'yet I do not see why the prisoner, or I as his friend, may not question the prosecutor as to——'

'In Tylter, on court-martial and military law, in Hough and in Simmonds,' began Major Rammer, with emphatic solemnity, and glaring through his goggles round the table, 'it is distinctly laid down——'

'Clear the court!' cried some one else.

It was again cleared accordingly, and all the orderlies, idlers, and wondering advocates, had to make a stampede into the dreary stone passages outside.

The debate, whatever it was about, was a stormy one, and above the voices of all others was heard that of Major Rammer citing Hough and Simmonds. The president had never sat on a court-martial before—and, perhaps, had always hoped he might never do so, and never be called upon to give a casting vote in any question in this world; thus he was induced to comply with the dictum of the fiery-nosed and irritable Major Rammer, in all matters in the present instance, and the charge was eventually brought clearly home.

The two doctors, though both fast friends of Cecil's, when examined as to the after-effects of his mysterious illness, only served to make matters worse; and, as doctors proverbially disagree, they did so as to the symptoms on this.

'Clear the court!' once more thundered Major Rammer, and

after it was cleared again, the major returned to the attack, flanked by Hough and Simmonds.

In short, the personage who alone could have thrown any clear light on the whole catastrophe was utterly unthought of by all, and was enjoying himself in the country while waiting impatiently the result of his treachery as reported in the public prints.

When the defence came, the colonel, the adjutant, and others, bore the highest testimony to the goodness of Falconer's character and disposition, his attention to duty, the love borne him by his brother officers and soldiers, and his gallantry on more than one occasion in India.

Hart's Army List was not at hand as to the latter.

'Clear the court!' suggested Major Rammer, who required documentary proofs of the said 'gallantry,' though his own breast was bare of all decorations.

'Well!' exclaimed Fotheringhame, as they were again cooling their heels in the passage; 'if the proceedings of this day are published, they will read rather queerly;' to which he added something not meant for ears polite.

Why prolong this account—a painful legal farce, for such the ignorance of the president, and the interference of 'the well-read' Major Rammer made it?

To those who knew Cecil well, his handsome face seemed pale—a face always grave and dignified; and his eyes seemed to observe the proceedings with a strange listlessness.

As afternoon drew on Major Rammer offered less opposition; Cecil was allowed to ask a few questions, as the former perhaps found himself in a minority, though most industrious in distributing slips of paper, with observations and quoted 'precedents,' all round the table. The tedious proceedings were at length closed—the opinion and finding given—the punishment, whatever it was, meted out, and proceedings on which the existence—certainly the future—of Cecil Falconer seemed to depend, were despatched to the Horse Guards by the swift night mail.

The weary Falconer's room that night was filled with sympa-

thisers, and the proceedings were discussed, and 'that old pump Rammer' duly stigmatised, amid the consumption of much tobacco, champagne, brandy and seltzer, long after tattoo, the roll-calling, the last farewell sound of 'lights and fires out' had pealed from the citadel gate and in the Grand Parade, and after silence and the silver moonlight fell together on the vast fortress and its rock.

'I thank all much, very much,' said Cecil, with no small emotion; 'but it is no use you fellows talking: there is nothing for me now but to drift quietly away into the dark sea of ruin —it may be death!'

His lips were working convulsively as he spoke.

'Let the worst come to the worst, I'll bear it like a man, and drag out the remnant of my life (without *her*,' he thought) 'an adventurer, a beggar, an emigrant—a soldier in some foreign service, perhaps—what matters it how or when the bitter end may come? I'll not shoot myself anyhow—that were the deed of a sinner and coward!'

'For God's sake, Cecil, don't run on this way! It's enough to make a fellow's heart bleed!' said Fotheringhame, with much anxiety of manner.

'Who knows what becomes of those fellows who go to the dogs, or are driven there?' he asked bitterly.

'Take heart, man—take heart,' urged Dick Freeport, patting him on the shoulder: 'you'll be, at worst, put at the bottom of the list of captains; and you're not very far above that now.'

'No, no, Dick; I read dismissal in the faces of the President and that artillery fellow who was so infernally well up in Hough and Simmonds.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

A PAGE OF LIFE TURNED OVER.

THE Horse Guards did not seem in haste regarding Cecil's affair; some days passed on, and hope began to flicker up in

the hearts of all—even the heart of Cecil—of all save Hew, we should say, as that worthy scanned the morning papers, for what he wished to see, in vain.

Evening was always an intolerable time to Cecil at this period—debarred the mess, and secluded in his room, where, left totally to himself, he was wont to indulge in those dreamy reveries that are engendered by a good cigar.

At six-and-twenty or so, it is indeed a dreary thing, when, as a writer says, 'much of life seems still before us, and a dark unfathomable future lies between us and the grave; when it is a bitter thing to sit alone and ponder on the days to come, and discover no bright spot in the darkness, discern no kind hand to beckon us forward.'

There was an evening which Cecil was fated to remember long, when amid other scenes, and when surrounded by much of peril and suffering.

It was the sunset of a lovely spring day. Beyond the ramparts of that great fortress, to look on which to every Scotsman must seem 'the phantasy of a thousand years comprised within a single moment,' the distant glories of the departing sun threw forward in dark and rugged outline the wooded hills of Corstorphine, bathing in ruddy light the waters of the Forth, with its shores and isles seeming to substitute the hues of heaven for those of earth.

Lost in sad thoughts he sat by the window of his lonely room, dreamily watching the evening haze tinted with gold by the sinking sun, that already involved in obscurity the lower portions of the city, the gardens where of old the North Loch lay, and out of which the castle rock, the spires and fantastic masses, the pillared buildings on the Mound, rose as from a sea, the gathering obscurity, lending a strange witchery to that wonderful view.

Cecil was then in one of his saddest moments. In his hand was a tiny packet, and gently and tenderly he fingered it, for it contained the withered daisies culled from his mother's grave; and his heart grew very full as her image came vividly to

memory with all the idolatrous love she had for him, her only son.

'Thank God she knows nothing of all this shame and misery! Yet, who can say—perhaps?' he muttered, and cast his eyes upward for a moment.

An essayist tells us that 'memory is the peculiar domain of the individual. In going back in recollection to the scenes of other years, he is drawing on the secret storehouse of his own unconsciousness, with which a stranger must not intermeddle.' So Cecil felt himself a child again, and into that storehouse he looked back to much of love and sorrow, to many struggles, anxieties, and triumphs, known to him and his mother only—his dead mother, of whom we may learn much more anon; and now by the course of events believing that Mary Montgomerie was utterly lost to him, he clung more than ever to the memory of his mother, for she had been all the world to him, as he to her.

'Could I expect that she would spend all the best years of her life waiting for a fellow who might never be able to marry her?' he had said once to Fotheringhame.

'But, man alive!' responded the other, 'she is able to marry you.'

'Was, you may say; we are separated now for ever.'

Times there were when Cecil thought he should go mad, as the whole situation in all its details of too probable ruin and disgrace, together with the certain loss of Mary, swept through his brain with painful and provoking iteration.

Could it be that he was the victim of some plot? Hew had been near him on that night, he had heard; but that was all. Had twenty nights or twenty years elapsed since that fatal ball? he sometimes thought, for most strange seemed the confusion of time and inversion of events.

So full was he of much and heavy thought, that he did not hear his door open, or was conscious of anyone approaching, till a dog suddenly leaped upon him, thrusting its cold nose into his hand, and anon licked it with hot, flapping tongue

—Snarley, as if conscious that his friend was in trouble, for Snarley it was, grovelling and abasing himself at his feet.

Tommy Atkins had ushered in three ladies and Fotheringhame, their escort.

'Mary!'

'Cecil!'

The two names on each tongue conveyed a world of tenderness, and tender was the light that shone in the eyes of each—tender and yearning too, as they held each other's hands, poor souls, and oblivious of those who stood by and tried to look unconscious, held their hands fast mutually, as if each had recovered some dear treasure, combined with heart and soul.

'You here, Mary!' exclaimed Falconer.

'Yes, Cecil, with Mrs. Garth and Annabelle.'

'If the general knew that I had chaperoned Mary here,' said Mrs. Garth tremulously, as she pressed his hand, 'I should certainly be discarded, and find myself homeless in my old age.'

'I thank you, from my soul, Mrs. Garth!' exclaimed Cecil; 'after all the evil that has befallen me, is he still implacable as ever?'

'As ever,' replied Mrs. Garth, while Mary only answered with her tears; but Snarley, in the exuberance of his joy, gambolled about among her skirts, as if a lively young rat was hidden there; and Fotheringhame, thinking that the lovers had better be left to themselves, took Falconer's powerful field-glass, threw open the window at the end of his long room, and invited Mrs. Garth and Annabelle to discover, if they could, the outlines of Ben Lomond and the lights of Stirling twinkling out at thirty miles' distance, thus affording the two aching hearts a little interchange of words and caresses.

There are few women in this world who do not resolve firmly and act vigorously when the tender interests of their hearts are affected; thus Mary had somewhat stepped out of her path, at all hazards, to see and console in his affliction the man who loved her, and whom, she had begun to fear, she might never meet again.

What course events might take she knew not, but she knew well that she had been pitilessly told to expect the worst: thus a great pity filled her soul, side by side with her love for Cecil.

Cecil's heart was too full for utterance; he could only whisper to her brokenly, and fold her closely to his breast, while in a soft and cooing voice, yet brokenly too, she assured him of her belief in his perfect innocence, and of her love which would never, never change or pass away but with her life; and a great calm seemed to come over the tortured heart of Cecil as he heard her, and told her again and again how kind, and sweet, and loving—and how merciful too—it was of her to come and tell him all this.

Mary had now her own thoughts of Hew as to the fatal event—suspicions, but they were vague, intangible; and even to Cecil she said nothing of them, nor meant to do so, till the worst came, though she knew not in what form to shape them.

No one among us knows the depth or intensity of the tenderness we have for anyone we love or value, till on the eve of losing them, perhaps for ever; and the great solemn dread that falls on the heart—even as the shadow of death. And Mary, by a deep and solemn presentiment, seemed to feel this, when, after a protracted interview, during which the same broken-voiced and loving assurances were reiterated again and again, at Mrs. Garth's emphatic request she rose to leave Cecil.

Why should they be rent asunder? she thought. She was rich and thus powerful, on one hand; yet how helpless were both on the other!

'I thank you, Mrs. Garth,' said Cecil; 'bear with us a little, for our burden is a heavy one.'

'It has been truly said, dear Captain Falconer,' replied the old lady sententiously, yet softly, 'that we must bear the burden of our lives, whatever it be, and content us with whatever lot God is pleased to accord us.'

'True; yet mine may prove a very hard one. But Mary's face, and voice, and tears, I hope will give me strength in the days to come, if they bring greater evil to me.'

'All love you,' said Mrs. Garth, kissing him on the cheek.

And while pressing Mary's hand, Cecil replied by the quotation:

'"The love of all is but a small thing to the love of *one!*"

Mary had been possessed by a craving to see and to comfort him, if possible; hence the unexpected visit. Like balm poured upon a wound, it had comforted him, and assured him of her love unchanged whatever happened; but save in that instance, nothing had come of the visit, and the future was as vague and uncertain as ever.

Cecil did not leave his room at the request of Fothering hame, who had a wholesome or nervous dread of anything approaching a scene or situation, and yet he was soon to bear a part in one himself!

Clinging to Mrs. Garth, how Mary got out of the fortress she scarcely knew; hurrying down the steep stone staircase, past the gun-batteries, on which the great-coated sentinels now trod to and fro, and then through the deep archway (where whilom the double portcullis hung), and under the shadow of the stupendous Half Moon Battery.

Neither, perhaps, did Annabelle Erroll, for she had painful thoughts of her own—bitter, jealous and fiery thoughts—all unlike those of Mary, in whose heart there gushed up a passion of love, sorrow and pity, that filled with hot and blinding tears the gentle eyes her close-drawn veil concealed.

They had not come in the carriage, but by a common cab, and as Fotheringhame, with great tenderness, was leading Annabelle to it, she saw—beyond a doubt—the veiled woman of the ball passing *in* by the barrier gate.

Beyond a little nervous start as she passed them—a start felt probably by Annabelle, whose hand rested on the arm of Fotheringhame — he gave no other sign of that person's vicinity; but the sign was sufficient to make Annabelle withdraw her hand instantly, and receive his farewell adieux with a brevity and coldness that rather bewildered him.

But the voice of Leslie Fotheringhame came indistinctly to

her ears—he seemed to be speaking a great way further off than that barrier gate, where the Cameronian sentinel stood, and she could see the great battery with its cannon and port-holes towering overhead, as through a dull and misty haze.

What did it all mean?

CHAPTER XXX.

GONE!

IT is said that 'there is nothing so difficult to believe as a certainty, till we have lived long enough to feel that it *is* a certainty, and not a delusion'; but Cecil Falconer soon realised the fact of his ruin.

With much genuine commiseration of manner and great kindness of tone, the adjutant had acquainted him that he had been dismissed generally—not specifically—and that her Majesty had no further occasion for his services, and that the general order thereanent would be out in a day or two!

Cecil had boasted of the strength given to him by Mary's visit; yet, when the crash came, his strength and spirit alike gave way.

'My good name and my commission were all I possessed in the world, and I have lost both!' exclaimed Cecil to Fotheringhame, who grasped his hand impetuously; 'what will life be, henceforth, for me?'

Fotheringhame felt for him deeply, keenly, yet scarcely knew, from the depth of his own emotion, and the desperation of the crisis, what to say.

'Think of Mary Montgomerie,' he urged, after a pause.

'I do think of her, but to what end or purpose? She is further removed from me than ever. To marry her would be to deprive her of fortune and position—to place her at the mercy of the general and of Hew; and I—what have I to share with her but disgrace?'

His sun had set—his day of life was over—over at its dawn and flush! His heart failed at the hopeless and penniless prospect before him; and the impossibility of having to reconstruct a whole life for the future on some new plan, and with other appliances—or die!

'My dear Fotheringhame, thanks for your sympathy,' said he; 'but the sooner I am out of this place, the better now.'

'And whither do you mean to go?'

'Heaven alone knows—I do not!' was the half-despairing response.

The news spread fast, and, apart from his brother-officers, the men of his company came by sections and scores to shake his hand and bid him farewell. All felt for him, loved him and sorrowed for him, and the dark dream seemed to be in progress still. Could it all be real?

The first preparation for departure was to take from his desk the withered daisies culled from his mother's grave, and place them in his breast. An intense longing was in his heart now to be gone—to go, go, go—anywhere!

'I am going away, Tom,' said he to Atkins, who was hovering about him, and mechanically polishing the sword he would never draw again.

'Where to, sir?' asked Tom.

'I don't know where to—as yet—but I'm out of the regiment now.'

'Out of the regiment,' faltered Tom, as if it was an impossible event, even after all that had preceded it.

'Yes; I am, God help me, a broken man!'

There was a sob in Tom's throat, and he ventured to wring his master's hand.

'And you leave, sir——'

'As soon as I can, Tom. Take this note to the paymaster—I'll need all the money I can get.'

Tom saluted, took the note, but hurrying into his kitchen, in tremulous haste took a little packet from his knapsack and returned to place it in Cecil's hand.

'What is this?' asked the latter.

'Not much, sir. You'll excuse me, sir. I can't go away with you, but I may help you, at least.'

'But what is this—money?'

'Only a matter of ten pounds sent me by mother, to make me comfortable a bit. I am sorry it isn't more, sir; but if you'll take it to help you for poor Tommy Atkins's sake, he'll be a proud man to-night. You've been a kind master to me, sir, and—and——'

But here the private soldier fairly broke down, and wept outright, 'bo-hooing' like a whipped urchin. Falconer was greatly affected.

'Thank you, my dear fellow—thank you; but this can't be,' said he: and he had no small difficulty in getting Atkins to keep the proffered money.

'Look here,' said Acharn to a group next morning in the mess-room, 'Falconer had only his pay, and this sentence is ruin and beggary to him; I have here a cheque for eight hundred at his service, and I know that you fellows, and ever so many more of the mess, will stump up. We must do something to start him, somehow or somewhere; but how or where is beyond me, for poor Cecil is a soldier, and nothing but a soldier.'

'But where the deuce is he?' asked Fotheringhame, who with Freeport came in with genuine anxiety expressed in their faces, to state that his rooms were empty; that he had left the fortress ere tattoo was beaten last night, and Atkins knew not where he was gone.

'He has got from old Blunt, the paymaster, the last money due to him,' Fotheringhame said; 'and he has nothing with him but a small portmanteau and a brace of revolver pistols. Everything else—his uniforms, and so forth—he has, by a note, left with me.'

'Where can he have gone?' said one.

'Oh, we'll trace him somehow,' said another.

But all attempts to trace him proved utterly unavailing.

So he had left the regiment, silently, quietly and alone, and of course, under the peculiar circumstances, without the farewell dinner given to a departing comrade—left it without shaking the hand of anyone formally—quitting the castle in the night, unseen and unrecognised, taking only a few clothes and his pistols.

'What does he mean to do with them?' asked Freeport.

'Where *can* he have gone—what done with himself?' were the general surmises, while his sorrowing friends looked blankly in each other's faces, and Fotheringhame had a great yearning to see and talk with Mary Montgomerie on the subject, and was not without a lingering hope that she might be able to throw some light on the mystery that enveloped the disappearance of Falconer; but in this matter he was mistaken, for the days passed on and he was heard of no more.

Evil tidings fly fast: thus on the very night of Cecil's departure, through the general, his household became aware of the fate that had befallen the unfortunate.

Looking like a saint in her pure white nightdress, Mary sat on the edge of her bed, weeping bitterly after Mrs. Garth had left her, and refusing all the earnest yet commonplace comfort that Annabelle Erroll strove to give her.

'Oh, what shall we do?' she exclaimed, wringing her slender hands, for in the word 'we' there was an affectionate sense of identifying *his* existence with her own; and in this action, as in every other, Annabelle could not help admiring a good deal of that elegance and grace which marked every movement, posture and gesture of Mary Montgomerie. 'What shall we do? Crushed, poor and ruined as he is, he is dearer to me than ever. Cecil—Cecil—come to me, Cecil!' she added hysterically, and hid her face in the bosom of Annabelle, who was weeping freely too, and no doubt thinking of the woman with the veil, as she said:

'How unfortunate we are, dearest Mary, to have both be-

come involved with men whose lives are enveloped in some cruel or degrading mystery.'

'Oh, do not say so—so far as poor Cecil is concerned,' replied Mary, with something of indignation in her tone.

Next morning found her face to face at the breakfast-table with Hew, whose features wore their brightest expression, and who was rubbing his cold fishy hands with unconcealed exultation; but Mary had got over her weeping now. She was very pale, and to all appearance heard unmoved the general reading in the morning papers the final details of Falconer's catastrophe —*fiasco*, as he called it—to Mrs. Garth, who was officiating at the urn. But Sir Piers laid aside the paper as soon as he perceived her. All could see her pallor, and an expression of irrepressible anguish about her delicate lips—the result of mental rather than physical suffering; and in truth Mary had not slept all night.

A letter lay beside her cup—a letter brought by morning post. It was addressed in Cecil's handwriting. Sir Piers was eyeing her firmly and inquiringly as she took it up hastily and placed it unopened in the bosom of her dress; but the moment breakfast was over, she hurried away to her own room to peruse it, with tears that blurred the lines, and hands that shook tremulously.

It told her briefly that he was about to leave his native land for ever, but for where he knew not yet, and cared not; and the concluding words went straight to her affectionate heart:

'Farewell, Mary—farewell, my darling—mine no more! farewell for ever, now. All is over with me. We have both been rash in loving each other so tenderly, without the consent of Sir Piers, your guardian; but our rashness has ended roughly, cruelly, and sorrowfully, especially for me. I have dreamed a happy dream in loving and being beloved by you—a dream the recollection of which will brighten all that remains to me of life, in the desolate path that lies before me.'

And so he was gone, without trace, as Fotheringhame eventually told her.

Again and again she pressed that tremulously written letter to her lips and murmured:

'My darling—my poor lost darling!—surely he will write to me, or his friend, again!'

But days passed on, and became weeks and months, and no letter or sign came.

The worst had now come to pass; her vague suspicions of Hew's complicity in the affair were useless now, and Cecil seemed lost to her for ever.

'Now,' thought Sir Piers, with grim satisfaction, 'now that this unfortunate fellow Falconer is gone, he will forget Mary, and she will forget him, and, as a matter of course, Mary will return to her senses, and Hew's time will come.'

Perhaps Hew thought so too.

'When she sees him no more she will cease to grieve for him,' said Mrs. Garth, 'and this sore trouble will be lifted off our darling's heart in time—please God, in time.'

But the very mystery that involved Cecil's departure added to the trouble and thought of the girl he left behind him.

A nervous agony of mind and a great terror fell upon Mary—a terror that with Cecil's hopeless and aimless departure, none knew for where, a long and dull life lay before her, without the society of him for whom she seemed only now to have begun to exist—he so winsome, manly, chivalrous, and all her own.

Through the long weary hours of the night she often lay dry-eyed and feverish, without a tear coming to relieve her overcharged heart, for she and Cecil seemed parted now and for ever, as surely as if death had done so. Wild, at times, was the longing to follow him—but *where?*

Would she ever throw her soft arms round him again, and feel his lip meet hers?

Then the warm bright morning of the early summer would come mockingly in, and the routine of life had to be dreamily gone through.

So these two were parted thus, without having knowledge of

each other, in sickness or health; and without the hopeful joy of a happy meeting, or reunion at any time, to look forward to.

It is 'when we are left alone with the reality of an anguish that has hitherto been but a dread, there comes the darkness, which, like that of Egypt, may be *felt*.' And such was the dark anguish that fell upon the heart of Mary now.

CHAPTER XXXI.

'THE INITIALS.'

In the last chapter we have somewhat anticipated the progress of time, for in the first few weeks after the disappearance of Cecil Falconer, certain disagreeables in the love of Fotheringhame and Annabelle Erroll, fortunately for Mary, served to attract her attention and draw her from her own great sorrow.

Fotheringhame was always a welcome guest at the house of the general. To Mary he seemed a link with the lost one, and through him alone could she hope to hear tidings that might come to any member of the mess. To the general, whom he viewed, so far as his friend Cecil Falconer was concerned, as a stupid, obstinate, proud, and avaricious old man, he was specially welcome, as the patient listener to his prosy reminiscences of India, of battles and marches, of pig-sticking, shooting expeditions, and potting maneaters, all of which Fotheringhame heard with respect and feigned interest, that he might the more freely enjoy the society of Annabelle, and of Mary, whom he really loved for the affection she bore his lost friend.

His engagement with Annabelle was no secret now; but if it was a source of joy to him, to her it was not without painful doubts and fears, for he seemed to have some secret which she, as yet, failed to probe.

That he and the lady she had twice seen, had some hidden and intimate knowledge of each other, the words overheard by Annabelle on the night of the ball seemed fully to prove. Then

there was his undisguised emotion on seeing her pass into the fortress on the night of the visit to Falconer, an emotion that inflamed anew the suspicion, jealousy, and natural indignation of a proud and sensitive girl like Annabelle.

What was this stranger doing there, she thought, passing the sentinels unchallenged, as if it was her use and wont? whither was she going, if not to visit Fotheringhame in his quarters? Who, and what was she, and in what manner related to him? Whence this vulgar mystery which had suddenly come into the lives of her and her intended, after their reconciliation and complete reunion had given her so much of the purest joy?

It filled her with a nameless dread, and as women, in joy as in sorrow, generally seek the sympathy of each other, now in her jealousy, pain, and mortification, it was natural of Annabelle Erroll to confide in her friend and gossip Mary, while, in gusts of pride and anger, she sometimes failed to appear when Fotheringhame came to visit her, or received him with a coldness that certainly seemed to excite in him pain, surprise, and pique.

Hew, who had some intuitive perception of all this, and who dearly loved mischief for its own sake, brought home exaggerated, and even false, statements of how and where he had met Fotheringhame with ladies generally, and especially with *one* lady in particular.

'Who she is no one knows, but she is always attired in the richest and most becoming of outdoor costumes.'

'And seems a lady?'

'Undoubtedly, so far as air and bearing go.'

'Most strange, Hew!'

'Not strange at all, Mary, as the world goes,' said he, with a laugh.

'If you are sure of all this, Hew,' said Mary, 'it is a wrong, a great wrong, to Annabelle.'

'Stuff!' said he. 'Why, Ulysses loved Penelope very well, but that did not prevent him from being very jolly with Calypso. But people are generally known by the company they frequent,

and we all know *who* was his particular friend. What the devil can that fellow have done with himself? He is too poor for the wine trade, and must have turned digger at Ballarat, or a donkey-merchant in Texas.'

Mary gave him a glance of ineffable disdain, and turned away. She felt keenly for the anguish and wounded self-esteem of her friend; and she felt deeply mortified that the chosen friend of Cecil should be playing the present double part of Fotheringhame, for the general had seen him with this lady, and he could not be mistaken.

'And Cecil, where was he?' she would whisper to herself for the thousandth time, as she drew forth a locket with some of his hair.

'It is so little to have of him, and yet so much that it reminds me of him all!' she would say, kissing it tenderly, and retying the tiny ribbon that bound it; 'my darling Cecil—my own darling!'

Anon she would drop it softly into her bosom, and let it nestle there.

But soon some brief and important events brought about a kind of crisis in the affair of Annabelle and Fotheringhame.

After leaving the general's house one afternoon, it was found that he had dropped a note on the carpet, a note which he had apparently drawn forth with his handkerchief, and Annabelle picked it up. The envelope was addressed to him in a pretty and free feminine hand, and the top of the page began, 'My dear Leslie.' Neither of the girls read more, but instantly replaced it in the cover. Annabelle, as she grew ghastly pale, gazed with sparkling yet doubting eyes upon the note.

'What did it all mean? What was to be done?'

It bore a monogram in blue and gold, 'F. F.,' and there was a sweet yet subtle perfume about the note that, like the florid monogram, spoke surely of a female in the matter, and of a feminine taste too.

'What *shall* we do?' asked Mary, in great perplexity.

'Enclose it, dear, in an envelope of yours, and post it to

him,' said Annabelle. 'I do not wish to seem as if I knew aught of it.'

Bursting with natural curiosity, poor Annabelle no doubt was; yet she was too honourable and ladylike to pry into the matter, though, sooth to say, it so very nearly concerned herself.

'Perhaps it is only a note of invitation,' suggested Mary.

'Scarcely,' replied Annabelle, with difficulty restraining her tears; 'but I shall end this, Mary, by bringing my most protracted visit to a close, and go home to mamma, who has been urging me to do so.'

So the note was enclosed and despatched, and another came from Leslie Fotheringhame, thanking Mary for returning the former, adding that 'it was scarcely worth while doing so;' and when next they all met, the subject was ignored; but there was a cloud over Annabelle's face, for the memory of the note, in connection with other matters, haunted and tormented her. But he, in manner, was calm, affectionate, and unchanged—the same as usual.

'It cannot be from Blanche Gordon,' she thought, 'though she certainly was at the ball. This woman—F.F.—can it be possible that she is some former flame of Leslie's, with whom he has renewed his intimacy?'

Her jealous fancies ran riot, and not unnaturally.

Next day, Mary, when attended by a groom, riding in a sequestered lane, between trees and hedgerows, came suddenly upon Fotheringhame and the unknown, walking slowly together hand in hand, in a calm, apparently accustomed, and affectionate manner, that filled her with so much grief and astonishment, that, wheeling her horse in another direction, and escaping them, as she hoped, unseen, she dashed home at a gallop, and at once sought her friend.

Without removing her habit or hat, she threw her arms round the neck of Annabelle, who, though used to her impulsiveness, was certainly startled.

'Dearie—my dearie,' she exclaimed, 'can you bear evil tidings?'

'That may depend upon what they are,' replied Annabelle, growing very pale in anticipation.

'Well,' said Mary, in a broken voice, while drawing her friend close in an embrace, 'you must teach yourself to—to forget Leslie Fotheringhame.'

'Not a difficult task, perhaps, as matters have been going,' was the bitter response; 'but why?'

'I have had ocular proof that he is trifling with you and your love, and that he has, I fear, a wife already—this "F.F." no doubt.'

'Married!' said Annabelle, in a breathless whisper, while the four walls of the room seemed to fly round her, and the eyes of Mary, who was impetuously grasping at a conclusion, wore a strange expression in which high indignation was blended with the tenderest pity as she related what she had just seen, and added:

'Oh, my darling, be calm! I am so sorry to tell you this—but, but—what can we think?'

'Ah! why does he deceive me so cruelly—why labour thus to break the heart of one who loves him as I do?'

'You must learn to think and speak in the past tense now,' continued Mary, whose tears fell fast, and she clasped her friend to her own bosom caressingly.

'Married,' thought Annabelle, 'that cannot be; but he is perhaps about to cast me off—play me false for another again?'

Anger and scorn struggled with love and sorrow in her heart; but her blue eyes were dry and tearless.

'Had papa been alive, Leslie dared not have treated me thus!' she exclaimed; 'but he knows I have no protector now, save a widowed mother. I wish that I had not met him again, Mary, or that I were dead—dead!' she exclaimed through her clenched teeth.

Mary, alarmed to see the storm she had raised, now attempted to soothe Annabelle.

'We may judge too rashly, after all, dearie,' she urged; 'it may be only one of those meaningless flirtations to which most young men—officers especially—are, it seems, addicted.'

'What right has he to engage in such, even if it be so?'

'Cecil's friend could never be so base!' urged Mary again. 'Oh, let us cling to the hope that it is something that may yet be explained away.'

'It—what?' asked Annabelle impetuously.

'This apparent mystery.'

But less gentle than Mary, who was apt to take refuge in tears, Annabelle said with outward calmness, though she felt only despair and exasperation:

'I fear that he is totally without principle—false as the fell serpent that beguiled Eve!'

And when night came she was thankful to lay her weary head on the pillow, though she did so, not to sleep, but to long that she was again at home beside her mother, and to agonise herself with doubts and fears as to the issue of this affair, to which she was resolved there should be a climax, either verbally or by letter, on the morrow, when Fotheringhame was expected to luncheon.

But on the morrow matters took a new and more startling turn, ere time for luncheon came.

Mary, who had been idling over the morning papers, suddenly drew Annabelle aside, and said:

'Look at this advertisement. Can it be that the creature takes the initial of his second name—if not his name altogether?'

Annabelle read what the speaker's slender fingers indicated, and it ran thus:

'Will L. F. meet F. F. to-day in the N. G. at twelve o'clock?'

'This is evidently an appointment between these two—and in the National Gallery!' said Annabelle. 'Oh, it is intolerable!'

'I must confess that so far as the initials go, it looks as if such an event was on the *tapis*,' said Mary.

'But this mode of correspondence is surely beneath Fotheringhame?'

'Though not beneath her—it is *her* request.'

'If married, she would not resort to this. I shall go to the Gallery, humiliating though the act may be.'

'And I too,' exclaimed Mary; 'let the carriage be countermanded—we were to have driven this morning, but we shall set out quietly on foot.'

Attired in dresses and hats of different style and colour from those they usually wore, and Shetland veils tied over their faces—than which there can be no more perfect masque—they set forth on this expedition, which was one of great pain to both, but more particularly to Annabelle.

It was a bright April forenoon, raindrops still rested on the fresh green leaves, and sparkled in the sunshine, early flowers bloomed abundantly in the gardens, perfuming the air, and the young birds were twittering in the trees. Pure and bright, it was a morning calculated to make anyone feel happy without knowing why; but the hearts of both girls were sad, and Mary sighed as she looked at the great masses of the fortress, steeped in the radiant sunshine, and thought of him who was away, she knew not where.

The National Gallery, with its Ionic porticoes, was soon reached by the way of Princes Street, and they entered the western range of saloons, which contain a very valuable collection of paintings by old masters and modern artists. At that early hour they were nearly empty.

Dreamily Annabelle looked at the various objects of art around her—the gigantic Ettys, the sweet proud bride of the victor of Barrosa—the long-hidden Gainsborough—the girl-wife of Grahame of Lynedoch; and then her eyes saw the figure of one she recognised again—the woman who had so evidently come between her and Fotheringhame—seated in a corner, apart from all, with her veil half-down, and her eyes fixed eagerly and expectantly on the entrance-door.

The two friends could see that she was perfectly ladylike in style and bearing, in pose and action, and that her costume, though plain and quiet in colour, was rich in material. Wrath and pride flamed up together in the heart of Annabelle, and

while shrinking behind a group of sculpture, that she might observe without being seen, she said:

'It seems to me most unladylike, this mode of espionage, and truth to tell it is humiliating in the extreme; but I have neither father nor brother to protect me, Mary, and so I must protect myself.'

'Take courage, Annabelle—perhaps we may deceive ourselves, and—and—oh, good heavens! here he comes!' said Mary, with a kind of gasp in her voice, as Fotheringhame, in 'mufti'—a very accurate morning costume—came with his swinging military step through the long gallery, and raised his hat with a somewhat sad and certainly fond smile on his face, as the unknown threw up her veil and advanced to meet him. But leading her back to her seat, he bent over her, and a low and earnest conversation ensued between them, yet not so low but that some of it reached the overstrained ears of Annabelle.

'It was rash of you to put in that advertisement,' said he; 'and I saw it by the merest chance, as I never examine the business columns of any paper.'

'Rash? but, dearest Leslie, it is rasher still, circumstanced as I am, to visit the castle,' she replied in a sweetly modulated voice.

Her face was a very fine one; her eyes were golden hazel—a perilous kind of eye—'light hazel, the fickle colour,' says a writer, 'the most fickle eye that shines—the eye ever changing, ever seeking something new, ever wearying of what it hath, ever greedy of enjoyment in the present, ever ungrateful for the past and unmindful of the future.'

Such were the eyes of the handsome woman on whom the face of Fotheringhame was bent with tenderness, and what a beautifully moulded face his was, with its heavy, dark moustache, straight nose and well-defined eyebrows.

'If my husband,' she began.

'Don't talk of him, Fanny!' he interrupted, angrily.

'Oh, the wretch is married!' whispered Annabelle.

'And her name is Fanny,' added Mary.

'And so the lawyers have got your case in their hands, my poor Fanny?' said he.

'Yes—and when may I get it out of them again?'

'The devil alone knows—he is the great master in all matters legal.'

(Now what could this case be, thought the listeners; here was a fresh mystery—perhaps degradation.)

'To serve you, I sold my troop in the Lancers, and with the money——'

'I know, Leslie—I know all, dearest. I have suffered much since then.'

'Despite all that, how handsome you are still!' said he tenderly and admiringly.

'I was handsome a few years ago, as you know well,' she replied with a sad, but coquettish smile; 'but why seek to flatter me now, dearest Leslie, you of all men?'

'There is a flatterer beyond us all, Fanny—your own mirror.'

She laughed at this, but there was undoubted sadness in her laugh.

'Intolerable!' muttered Annabelle, and unwilling to hear more of this mysterious conversation, she withdrew in grief and dismay, followed by Mary, who knew not what to make or to think of the whole situation.

They had barely reached home when Fotheringhame came punctually to luncheon, wearing the same dress he had worn at the peculiar assignation, easy and frank in manner, with his usual smile of tenderness for Annabelle, who strove to hide the coldness of her manner and the ire of her spirit, but utterly failed to check the nervous quiver of her sensitive lip.

Mary, who had to act as hostess, and who had no personal interest in this matter, scarcely knew what to do, or how to comport herself, full as she was of disappointment and just indignation. The abstraction of her manner was apparent to Leslie Fotheringhame, who scored it down to Falconer's affair; and as Sir Piers, Mrs. Garth, and Hew were

all absent, she was thankful for the attendance of Tunley on the trio; but the luncheon proceeded with indescribable slowness and oppressive silence—a silence broken only by strained and disjointed remarks.

At last the cold fowl, patés, etc., were discussed, and a move was made to the drawing-room, where Mary did not follow the pair of lovers, over whom she saw a stormy cloud was impending, and thought the sooner it burst the better for them both—for Annabelle most certainly—and Mary's tender heart seemed to bleed for the proud girl's humiliation.

'My dearest Belle,' said Fotheringhame, attempting to take her hands caressingly in his the moment they were alone, 'what is the matter to-day?—why this gloom and coldness of manner to me? In what have I erred or offended you?'

He gazed at her appealingly and passionately; but she snatched her hands away, and drew herself haughtily up to her full height, while her proud white face only expressed much scorn and much grief too.

'You treated me once shamefully, Leslie,' she began.

'Let the dead past bury its dead,' said he beseechingly; 'and now, dearest Annabelle——'

'How dare you speak to me thus again?' she asked, with half-averted face, and her blue eyes flashing with a kind of steel-like glitter.

'Thus—how?' he asked, in a bewildered and rather indignant tone, as it seemed to her.

'In terms of love or regard!'

'What *do* you mean, Annabelle?' he asked, after a pause. 'Surely you have not permitted me to speak of love to you again—since that happy day in yonder gardens—or rather lured me into it, but to repel and cast me off, in revenge for our quarrel in the foolish past time; beguiling me by your sweetness, but to fool me in the end?'

'I do not care *what* you think.'

'Good heaven! can it be that you do not love me, Annabelle—do not love me after all?'

'After all—all what, sir?'

'I hope, Annabelle,' said he, in the first faint tone of irritation she had ever heard from him, 'that after all this smoke, you have some fire to follow?'

'I do not understand you, Fotheringhame,' she replied, restraining her tears by a strong effort; 'but I fear that you are involved in something very dark and very dreadful. Who is Fanny—Fanny with the hazel eyes?' she demanded passionately; 'Fanny, who is in the hands of the lawyers—who is so afraid of her husband, and for whom you sold your troop?'

Bewilderment first, and then anger, appeared in the proud face of Fotheringhame, who certainly seemed not to know what to think, and grew very pale. Then he smiled, sadly and bitterly, with something of anger making his lip quiver.

'Surely, Annabelle,' said he slowly, as if to gain time to think, 'you, with your superior grace and beauty, assured position, and the indefinable charm you possess for all, and more than all for me, need fear no woman?'

'Jealousy is stronger than fear, and I am humiliated enough to be jealous. You have secret meetings with a woman to me unknown!' she exclaimed in a low, bitter and concentrated voice.

He grew still paler.

'You cannot deny it?' she added imperiously.

'I do not—deny it,' he replied sadly.

'On your honour, and ere all is over between us for ever, tell me who she is, though certainly it should matter little to me now.'

He paused, and, with a deep frown, began:

'If you are acting on information given by Mr. Hew Montgomerie——'

'I am not—I act on information gained by myself, and even thrust upon me; and here ends all between us,' she added, tearing off her engagement-ring, and thrusting it into his hand.

'Annabelle, I implore you to be patient, and reconsider this.'

'How dare you ask me to be patient under such insult and

wrong? Go, sir—I hate you—I never loved you—I leave you to this Fanny, whom we saw in her fitting place, among the domestics, on the night of the assembly—this matron of the period, whom I saw entering the castle, doubtless to visit you—the Fanny with whom you have secret meetings and a secret correspondence—begone to her, and cross my path no more!'

And sweeping from the room like a tragedy queen she left him.

'Did she but know *who* that woman is, would she speak of her thus?' said Leslie Fotheringhame, almost aloud, as he quitted the house with an emotion of deep distress, not unmixed with shame and anger.

He made two or three attempts to alter the decision that Annabelle Erroll had come to, of casting him off for ever. He called twice at the house of Sir Piers, but on both occasions was told that she was from home, and, Mr. Tunley added, was preparing to leave town. He wrote her a tender and most passionate letter which might—nay, surely would—have explained all; but it was returned to him unopened; and heaven only knew the bitter ache it cost the heart of Annabelle to act thus firmly and decidedly, for, sooth to say, the love of Leslie Fotheringhame had become, as it were, a part of her own existence, interwoven with her daily life.

She knew that their engagement had become known to many, and the inevitable *exposé* and gossip that must follow its sudden ending exasperated her justly; and thus pride struggled with grief for mastery in her heart, as she brought her visit to the Montgomeries to a close, and departed for her own home.

From casual remarks, Mary could learn that none among the Cameronians had ever heard aught of Cecil since the night of his disappearance. The poor fellow had passed out of their ken completely. Mary's grief was all the deeper because it was secret, and as time passed, the grass seemed to be growing over the grave of all her hopes.

When Fotheringhame left the regiment on leave, she ceased

to have expectation of ever hearing of Cecil in any way, even through Freeport or others; and it gave her much of a shock to learn that the mysterious lady—she of the golden hazel eyes—had left Edinburgh too—at least, so Hew gleefully informed her.

And now Mary—though she omitted all mention of this circumstance in her many letters to Annabelle—knew not what to think of Leslie Fotheringhame, save, perhaps, the worst!

She was sick of Edinburgh and its new associations—the ruin of Falconer and the too apparent perfidy of his friend; but she regarded with equal dread and disgust a return to the general seclusion of Eaglescraig, and the persecution of Sir Piers and of Hew Montgomerie, and bitterly in her heart did she inveigh against the absurdity of her father's will.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TURNING THE TABLES.

EAGLESCRAIG—wood and wold, field, garden and lawn—was in all the glory of summer now, when June brought with it, as usual, the fragrance of the red and white hawthorn blossoms, the song of the nightingale and the coo of the cushat-dove; May that gave fresh greenness to the young corn on the upland slopes, and studded the grass on the dairy farms of Cunninghame with white daisies and golden buttercups; June that saw the old general clad in grey, whipping the cool dark pools of the Garnock or the Irvine with rod and line, and the skylark soaring high amid the silver clouds—the full-uddered cows standing knee-deep in the heavy pastures, and the bees warring among the velvet buds; but where was *he* with whom Mary would fain have looked upon Nature and her native scenery in their glory?

Eaglescraig in summer was rather unlike the Eaglescraig to which Cecil Falconer had come in stern winter to shoot over the covers; but Mary's heart could gather no brightness from the locality, which, though changed and more beautiful than

in those days, was so full of his presence and associated with him: the lanes through which he had driven her pony-carriage when visiting the poor on missions of charity; the roads by which they had ridden to Kilwinning and elsewhere; the garden wherein they had so often lingered; the ancient dovecot on the lawn, and the grotto where—but why did she torture herself in the superstition of the heart, by recalling all that was, but never could be again?

As that heart foreboded, she was not very long at Eaglescraig before the old subject of her marriage with Hugh Montgomerie was resumed by Sir Piers, who nearly found an ally in Mrs. Garth, who came to the conclusion that everyone loved their first love, as a general rule, and married their second or third; though she was not without her fears that such a marriage would not be conducive to Mary's welfare, and knew well that too generally, in the end, 'as the husband is, the wife is.'

With all the regard that Hew affected to profess for Mary, it did not prevent him from growling heavily over exchanging Eaglescraig for Edinburgh, where, so far as its gaieties were concerned, everything was yet, as the Americans say, 'in full blast.'

'Here, in the quiet of the country,' said Sir Piers, 'she will have time to think over the escape she made from that fellow Falconer; and time to think over what she ought to do, Mrs. Garth.'

Time to think! Poor Mary had plenty of that: time to ponder in long and oppressive hours, as she lingered by the dovecot with the pigeons fluttering around her; by the burn that flowed at the garden-foot, with Mudie's last new novel half-cut and wholly unread in her lap; and, lost in a day-dream, saw the bees seek the flowers and the butterflies darting to and fro, while wondering with all the intensity of love and pity where *he* was, and what doing, now!

Sir Piers did not precisely see his way to acting like the stern parent or fiery guardian of the melodrama; but he thought

that the time was approaching when he *must* do something to bend Mary to his purpose, and compel or cajole her into the acceptance of Hew, his heir of entail and successor.

'You knew that—that young man but a very short time, Mary,' said he one day in reference to Falconer, and playfully pinching her chin.

'True,' she replied, with a sweet sad smile; 'but it does not take years to learn to—love. Was it so with you, grand-uncle?'

'No, by Jove! we were in cantonments at Simmerabad, and expecting the route every day, the route for Jubbulpore, when Lady Montgomerie and I were married, egad! at the drum-head, I may say.'

But as far as Hew's interests were concerned, a visit from Mr. John Balderstone one day gave Sir Piers much occasion to think over them—and pause.

A close correspondence with Annabelle Erroll was Mary's chief solace and support about this time; they had so much in common to commune about. Yet the name of Fotheringhame never once escaped the former, though he was mourning that a girl with such an amount of strength of character and so much loveliness had gone out of his life—for Annabelle was a wonderfully beautiful girl—beautiful with the charms of glittering golden hair, of slightness of form and white purity; tall, slender and full of grace; and though her heart was wrung by the memory of all she had passed through since the night of the Cameronian ball—that night on which she had been so happy—she thanked Heaven for the strength it gave her to cut the Gordian knot and quit the atmosphere of doubt, perplexity, degrading deception, and chaos, in which she had latterly found herself in Edinburgh. 'No girl could be expected to undergo that sort of thing over and over again,' as she once wrote to Mary; so well it was, she added, that she had with decision laid the future lines of her life and that of Fotheringhame so far apart from each other.

Hew was smoking on the terrace one forenoon, deep in the

study of his betting-book—a study that did seem a very pleasant one, if one might judge from the expression of his face—when he saw Mr. John Balderstone, the faithful and jolly old factor and friend of the family, coming ambling up the long avenue, top-booted, on his favourite old roadster, an easy-going bay, high in the forehead, round in the barrel, and deep in the chest, as John averred, 'all that a roadster should be;' and he dismounted at the entrance door with the air of a man who felt himself at home and sure of a welcome.

'Now, what can this old buffer want?' thought Hew sulkily, as the rider threw his reins to Pate Pastern, who took the bay round to the stables; 'but he is always coming here, whether wanted or not.'

'Good-morning, Mr. Balderstone,' he added, but without offering his cold, damp hand, which the visitor had never taken since the insulting trick had been played him with the pair of jack-spurs.

Between these two there was no open war, but a species of armed truce; a veiled dislike or species of civil suspicion. Mr. Balderstone knew pretty well the secret character of Hew, and cordially detested him. Hew knew the great influence the old factor possessed with Sir Piers, and had mentally resolved that when he 'came to his kingdom,' *i.e.* succeeded to the title and estate of Eaglescraig, Mr. John Balderstone should receive his *congé*, and pretty quickly, too; and that old Tunley, and even Sandy Swanshott, the aged game-keeper, together with Mrs. Garth, would have marching-orders, also. But the general 'was so confoundedly hale—seemed as if he would never die!'

'Did I not see Miss Montgomerie on the terrace?' said Mr. Balderstone, with a twinkle in his bright yet dark-grey eyes; 'she need not avoid me—bless her!—eh, billing and cooing as usual, I suppose, Mr. Hew?'

Hew muttered an ugly word under his red moustache, and said coarsely:

'I'll make my innings now, I suppose, as I have the field to myself.'

'And no red-coated rivals—eh?'

'Look here, Balderstone, I don't like chaff; but I can tell you that Sir Piers did me a deuced lot of mischief by bringing that fellow here from Dumbarton, and petting him, egad! as if he had been his own son. He is a regular old fool, Sir Piers!'

'I can hear nothing said against him, Mr. Hew.'

'At all events, I may indulge in a few bitter thoughts of this base-born interloper, who has caused so much turmoil.'

'Base-born—how know you that he is so?'

'Bah! I heard all about him in Edinburgh.'

'Not all, surely?'

'Yes, as sure as I am the heir to Eaglescraig! What are you laughing at?' demanded Hew, who had been in Tunley's pantry, sharply.

'I do laugh, and heartily too; but pardon me,' said old John Balderstone, whose paunch, enfolded in a deep corduroy waistcoat, was actually shaking, while Hew, by some intuition of coming mischief, he knew not why, eyed him dubiously, even savagely.

'By the way, have you ever heard aught of that unfortunate young gentleman?' asked the factor.

'What young gentleman?' said Hew sulkily.

'Captain Falconer.'

'Oh! the singing-woman's son—dancer, or whatever she was—no; how should I hear of him?'

'A pity—he must be found.'

'Found—for what?' asked Hew, growing pale, as he recalled the event of the ball. 'You'll have to seek him where he has gone.'

'And where is that?'

'The husks and the swine-trough—or the devil.'

'How can you speak so pitilessly?'

'I don't owe him much, I think,' muttered Hew, with an imprecation.

'God knows all you owe him.'

'How—why—in what way?' thundered Hew.

'As reparation.'

'D——n the fellow, I never wronged him!' exclaimed Hew, growing paler than ever, while his shifty eyes wandered restlessly about, and fear seized him that John Balderstone had discovered, he knew not what.

But on this day the latter took all Hew's insolence of manner with wonderful equanimity, while his rubicund face seemed to beam and ripple all over with good-nature, and his eyes were twinkling as if he had something *in petto* that greatly delighted him.

'Reparation,' growled Hew scornfully; 'reparation for what?'

'Here comes the general; he will tell you all about it,' said the factor, as Sir Piers, in an old tweed suit, arrived from a morning's fishing, with rod in hand, a full basket, and a venerable wideawake hat, garnished all round with flies and catgut.

'Welcome, John; welcome, Balderstone! you have business with me? Step indoors. A glass of sherry and a biscuit before luncheon—tiffin, as we say in India—and then we'll hear all about it.'

'Business to which Mr. Hew may as well listen, as it interests him very nearly,' said Mr. Balderstone, with a sudden gravity of demeanour that impressed the former unpleasantly, and filled his heart with the alarm of the guilty; and he was the first to assist himself to a glass of the sherry which Tunley placed on the dining-room table; 'and as what I have to relate is not without interest to our dear Miss Mary,' added Mr. Balderstone, 'I would wish her to be present too.'

'Now what the devil can all this be about?' thought Hew, in a cold perspiration, as he took another glass of sherry, and thought of the ball and the court-martial that came of it, while Mary seated herself near Sir Piers, with her heart beating quickly and unequally, and her white hands trembling at her Berlin-wool work.

'In this matter I must begin at the beginning, as we used to

read in the old story-books,' said Mr. Balderstone, polishing his bald head with his handkerchief, and looking up at the ceiling as if he would draw inspiration therefrom.

'Begin at the beginning!—don't say that,' said Sir Piers.

'Why, general?'

'Because it reminds me how a poor fellow of Ours used those very words when about to relate some secret to me, as he lay dying by the roadside, on the march to Malwah, and though he began at the beginning I never heard the end of his story; so we buried him beneath a palm-tree, in his cotton quilt, the only coffin we could afford him—poor old Sandy Freeport—the father of Dick who is in the Cameronians now; and I remember that John Garth read the funeral service over him by torch-light. Now fire away, Balderstone.'

The latter gazed fondly and admiringly on Mary in all her delicate beauty, clad in a loosely-made brown holland morning-dress, relieved only by the spotless white cuffs at the snowy wrists, and a simple collar of the same at her slender throat, and said:

'I have some strange tidings for you, Sir Piers—tidings which may seriously shock your nerves.'

'Never! d—n it, John Balderstone, speak out, sir!' said the baronet, with irritation. 'Who the devil ever heard of an old Cameronian with nerves! And these tidings——'

'Concern your son—your only son Piers.'

'What of him—now?' asked the other, in a changed and rather broken voice.

'His fate—his story.'

'Piers is dead,' said the baronet hoarsely, as he recalled the shadowy form—the dim, yet distinct outline—he had seen on the night of terror, so long ago.

'I know it,' said Mr. Balderstone, sadly: 'poor Piers—poor boy! for he was but a boy when compared with your years and mine now.'

'Well.'

'How Piers married the penniless daughter of a struggling

artist, and was therefore expelled from this house—yea, from this very room, you know,' said John Balderstone, speaking very slowly and deliberately, while the general's wrinkled hands grasped the knobs of his arm-chair, and he fixed his hollow yet bright eyes firmly on the speaker's face; 'how his commission was sold, and the money went, you know too; but there was much more that you and I never knew, and never shall know, till the long, long day when all things will be known. Piers became an artist, and died in sore penury some years after quitting his father's house.'

'Where?'

'In an obscure street of Rome; but he left behind him a son—the son of the girl he had married.'

'My grandson!'

'And heir.'

Hew fastened his glass in his eye—the green one—and glared at John Balderstone, who said:

'I know nothing precisely, though I can guess of months of penury and struggling to keep the wolf from the door, Sir Piers; but that such was the case I have little doubt from what I have gleaned: of wanderings from town to town—the husband trying to sell his pictures, and the wife to get engagements as a concert-singer—for she was highly accomplished—to support her husband in his last illness, and maintain her little boy. Piers was found dead one night at his easel. Pride prevented the widow from applying to you; and though she felt how sweet and dear it was to have her child as a precious link between her and Piers, she bestowed upon it her own name, which was Cecilia Falconer, and as Falconer the boy grew to manhood. Now you know *who* I mean!'

Sir Piers was struck dumb, and continued to grasp the arms of his chair with nervous energy, while Hew felt himself grow pale, and hot, and cold; and to the memory of the startled Mary came back the episode of Annabelle's 'Birthday Book,' and the curious admission of Falconer that he had been named Cecil after his mother.

In fact they were all paralysed and absorbed by the strangeness of this revelation.

'The proofs of what I say were sent to me, and thereby hangs another curious story,' continued John Balderstone. 'A woman of indomitable spirit and pride, this Cecilia Falconer (or Montgomerie) resolved that never in your lifetime, Sir Piers, would she seek your friendship or alliance, nor until your death make known the rank and claims of her son; but she died suddenly and unexpectedly, and the secret of *who* her husband was died with her, so far as Cecil was concerned, for indeed he knows it not even unto this hour.'

'Then how the devil do you——' began Hew impetuously; but Balderstone silenced him by a wave of his hand.

'Her great musical talents won her powerful and titled patrons, and through one of them she got her son a cadetship, and by a singular chance he was gazetted to the Cameronians the regiment of his father and grandfather.'

'I believe the whole affair a d——d tarradiddle, from beginning to end!' exclaimed Hew, while a kind of gasp escaped the general.

'You have not yet heard the end,' said John Balderstone with a quiet laugh, as he drew from his breast-pocket a large envelope or packet soiled by the dust of many years, and covered with old and foreign postal marks and stamps. 'In this envelope, addressed to me, as her husband's friend, the widow, when her last fatal illness came upon her, sent for safety three papers: the marriage certificate of herself and Piers, performed at Rome; the certified register of the child's birth, endorsed by herself and Piers, and the register of the latter's death at Rome. But the packet on which such interests depended had fallen behind a bookcase in my office; there it remained for fifteen years, and I never knew of its existence till yesterday. And here is your son's writing, Sir Piers, which I never expected to see again in this world, and it comes to me like a message from the dead,' added Balderstone, with a tremulous voice.

'From the dead, indeed!' added the general, more tremulously still, as he took the documents and strove to read them through glasses that became moist and dim.

On the back of the marriage-register was written in a feminine hand:

'*Nov.* 5.—He died to-night, speaking of his stern father and not of me who loved him so! Oh Piers! my husband, my husband! how shall I live without you—live on alone in the long years to come, unless it is for our boy? In losing you I lose my all. For me you gave up home, friends, fortune, rank and position—all the world for me—yet, oh my husband, all the wealth of my love was yours!'

The *date* corresponded with the general's dream or vision! Could Piers' spirit have flashed home at the instant of his departure? Can such things be, and may men see them and live? thought he.

'My poor Piers! my poor Piers!' he groaned. 'John Balderstone, none but God and myself can tell how I have suffered in my soul for my severity to him in the past time.'

And so the long years had gone and others had come; and behold this was all that had resulted from the old man's pride, petulance and injustice. His only son had died in penury and obscurity; that son's wife had despised even his vaunted name and had taken her own; and now, their only son, the legal and lawful heir of Eaglescraig, a crushed and ruined creature like his father before him, had been driven forth into the world, in darkness and despair, too surely also to ruin and death!

Sir Piers sighed bitterly, and seemed utterly to forget the existence of Hew, to whom this new state of things came like a prolonged roll of thunder. To the former it seemed as if the irrevocable past was throwing its shadow over his present and his future—a shadow deep as the grave; nay, that past made the future, and its shadow was over him still!

This accounted for the expression of eye that Mrs. Garth had traced in Cecil; and Sir Piers had now a perfect key to that which had so often perplexed him—a something that the

voice, face, and manner of Cecil brought to memory out of the mists of the past, causing him much vague and mental exercise —the resemblance to his dead son; clearly accounted for now, when too late—all too late, perhaps.

'Scratched—out of the race!' muttered Hew with an oath, as he slunk away, and betook him to brandy and seltzer in Tunley's pantry, while Mary, her lithe and slender form full of energy, her dark and eloquent eyes filled with joyous light, seemed all unlike the languid Mary of the past month or so, as Balderstone's narrative came to an end.

Could it all really be in earnest, and no dream? Cecil was her cousin—her own cousin, and that lawful heir of Eaglescraig whom Sir Piers, by the powers of his father's will, desired she should marry, while Hew was scarcely even a cousin by Scottish reckoning—little more than a namesake to her; but Cecil—Cecil, where was he?

Here was an astounding discovery; an absorbing topic from the discussion of which, although their minds were full of it, and overpowered by it, they were compelled to cease during dinner and other meals, in that jerky, half-and-half way which people are wont to adopt when servants are present, though the interest of their whole souls may be concentrated in it for the time.

But menials are close and watchful observers, and it was soon pretty well known to Mr. Tunley and all in the servants' hall, the topic which engrossed those in the dining-room—that Mr. Hew was not heir to the general's title and estate; but some one else was—*who* they scarcely could define. So the matter was speculated upon, twisted and turned over, eliciting a score of different opinions; but to all it was apparent that Sir Piers was perplexed, was daily conferring with John Balderstone; that Miss Mary—'bless her,' said they all—was radiant with joy; and Mr. Hew, with whom none sympathised —as might be expected—wore a sullen, baffled, and exasperated look.

The tables had been turned with a vengeance; but Hew

had one crumb of comfort: Cecil was gone, no one knew where, and might never be heard of again, in which case he—Hew—would resume his old place as heir of entail!

In his anxiety to discover the lost, and make some reparation to the dead, Sir Piers forgot all the dark colours in which Hew had painted Cecil, and felt with regard to his son that, as Dickens says, 'there is no remorse which is so deep as that which is unavailing; and if we would be spared its tortures, let us remember this in time!'

Mr. Balderstone suggested that they should advertise for the lost one; but poor Cecil was now where no advertisements would ever reach him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BY THE MORAVA.

SUNSET, red and glowing, in a lovely land where a long spur of the Balkan mountains overlooks the current of the Morava, and where fair fields of rice and maize, hemp and tobacco, cover the upland slopes, for it is early in September, and the days are of great heat still. The golden shafts or rays of the setting sun shot upward from the flank of the mountain range, and shed their ruddy gleam upon the shining river. Slowly sank the glorious sun, as if reluctant to quit the strange and terrible scenes it was leaving: on one side the camp and bivouac of an army, with its fires for cooking and scaring wild animals, its piles of baggage and arms, groups of soldiers in thousands; on the other, the awful *débris* of a newly-fought field, covered with killed and wounded men and horses, broken caissons and gun-carriages, drums and standards, pools of blood in which the flies were battening; and paler then grew the upturned faces of the dead, as the last segment of the sun disappeared, and the brightness it left behind began to deepen from gold and red to sombre violet in the plain, though light yet lingered on the mountain summits.

In the tents and around the fires, men spoke little of the artillery duel that had preluded the conflict, of whether the Servians had broken the armistice, or the Turks had done so by opening with their guns, and little even of the victory; for the soldiers fresh from it and flushed with triumph and carnage, Servians and Russians alike, spoke only of the gallant but nameless British volunteer who had saved the life of the general, the terrible old Tchernaieff, and that of his chief aide-de-camp, the gallant Count Michail Palenka, and who had been made a sub-lieutenant on the field, and decorated after it with the gold cross of the order called the Takovo of Servia, and welcomed back with shouts of:

'Dobro—dobro! Ghivo—ghivo!' (Well done—long life); 'hourah!'

In one of the terrible charges of cavalry, led by himself, Tchernaieff had his horse killed under him by a cannon shot, but this volunteer had remounted him on his own, and also dragged Count Palenka out of the terrible *mêlée*.

The Turkish horse were led, not by a Pasha or other officer, but by a frantic dervish, wielding on high a long staff, furnished at the end with a shining brass knob, and shouting:

'Allah is here! Allah and the angels who fought at Bedr!'

The Servian Hussars and Lancers, with the Russian Dragoons, advanced to join issue in the charge for a third time, not sorry to exchange close quarters for a desultory carbine-fire. Both sides came thundering on, the Lancers with their spears in the rest, the Dragoons with swords pointed to the front, and all with their horses well in hand, till within a few yards, when they let them go at racing speed, and dashed with terrible force and fury among the Turkish squadrons.

Anon the Lancers, finding their weapons useless at such close quarters, slung them, and smote heavily on every side with their keen bright swords. Long and hard was the fight, and for a time the mingling masses were too closely wedged in some places to use even their swords, and grappled with each other, while the entangled chargers, enraged and frightened,

reared, plunged, struck out and brained or trampled into gore the dead and wounded.

Here it was the volunteer saved the general and his faithful aide-de-camp, covering them as they struggled back, faint and breathless, out of the *débris;* thrusting with his lance till it snapped in two, and then hacking his way out with the sword; and it was only after it was all over, and he came afoot out of the field, dazed in aspect, with teeth set, eyes dilated and glaring with the fierce fever of battle, and clutching a sword, the blade and hilt of which were literally covered with blood, that he fairly knew what he had done, and the burst seams of his uniform showed all how well he had plied his weapon that day.

Thirstily and gratefully he took a draught from a tin canteen of Negotin wine, which a passing sutler gave him.

Cecil Falconer, for the volunteer was he, though in that blood-stained foreign uniform few would have recognised the once fashionable Cameronian officer, was sorely changed in aspect. He was browner visaged, bearded to the eyes, yet his face was worn and lined, and his eyes seemed sunk and keen, with the wolfish expression worn by those of men who are daily facing peril and death.

As a volunteer, he wore the uniform of a private—a brown tunic faced with scarlet, crimson pantaloons, now covered with blood and mud, and a grey cloth cap, not unlike the Scottish glengarry. Fighting in a cause for which—and in that of a prince for whom—he cared nothing; fighting in battle as a weaker spirit might have betaken itself to alcohol to drown the past and give oblivion to the present, poor Cecil had found his way to Servia, and had that day done wonders, setting little store on the lives of those he fought against—the barbarous and brutal Turks—and certainly none whatever on his own life.

Refused a commission in the service by the Servian Minister of War—for, by the influence of long conquest, there is much of the Ottoman in the character of the Servian people, who are fatalists, and as distrustful of all strangers as a John Bull of the

last century—he had joined 'Tchernaieff's Own' as a volunteer trooper, and on that day by the Morava had won his commission, and the cross of the Takovo; but what a mockery they were to him, and how little he cared about them!

Since joining in the humble and apparently hopeless capacity he had taken, he had undergone all the perils and miseries of the Servian campaign; had been compelled to consort, at times, with fierce and lawless comrades, who were most repugnant to his refined nature; he had been generous to all with his money, when he had any, which was not often now; he had nursed the wounded, buried the dead, and won golden opinions from all; he had groomed his own horse and the horses of others; had to hew wood, to cook coarse rations, when there were any to cook; slept on the bare earth in the rain and the storm, or sharing a *tente-d'abri* when one could be got, and sharing it with a comrade—some unsavoury and unwashed Servian trooper, whose vicinity was, in itself, a horror.

As most people know, but a very short time ago the Christians in Bosnia and elsewhere took arms against their oppressors, the Turks, who were unable to suppress the insurrection, and soon after the disturbance was intensified by a declaration of war against the Porte by Prince Milano Obrenovitch of Servia, who, by his army, was proclaimed King of Bosnia, and whose father, the alleged slayer of the famous Cerni Georges, began life as a cattle-driver, and first distinguished himself in battle so far back as 1807. Born in 1854, Prince Milano succeeded Michail III. (who was assassinated); and as the new war spread into Bulgaria, as we all know, it took the form of atrocities unparalleled in modern Europe, unless we except the Cromwellians at Wexford and the Williamites at Glencoe. The villages of the Christians were plundered and given to the flames; their male inhabitants slain without mercy, under nameless tortures; women and girls carried off to slavery. The dead lay heaped in the churches to which they had fled for shelter, and dogs and hungry kites tore their flesh as they lay unburied by the wayside.

And now it was within forty British miles of that Bulgaria, where so much wild work was being done, that on the evening of the 28th of September, after Tchernaieff had crossed to the left bank of the Morava below Boboviste, and fought one of the greatest battles in the Servian war—a battle in which Prince Milan lost 3,000 men, killed and wounded, while the Russians lost in proportion, and had sixty dead officers on the field—a battle in which the explosion of seven Turkish powder-caissons added to the horror and slaughter—that Cecil Falconer found himself warmly complimented, and again and again shaken by the hand, by old Tchernaieff, as the saviour of himself and his favourite aide-de-camp, Palenka.

'We shall never forget your services and your bravery this day!' said the latter—a pleasing and handsome man—in French.

'And your promotion, monsieur,' added the general, in the same language, 'will be my future care, either with the young King of Servia, or with our Father the Emperor, if you choose to take service in Russia, as so many of your countrymen, like Bruce, Wilson, Greig, and Ochterlony, have done, attaining fame and fortune.'

The offer was not an inviting one, but Cecil thanked the general for his gracious notice of his service, and for the rank and cross conferred upon him; and the former then rode off to his head-quarters, accompanied by Count Palenka.

He was a short, thick-set man, reserved and haughty in manner and bearing, and covered with Russian orders and medals, won in no petty wars. His eyes were small, the lids heavy; his nose was large; his complexion a ruddy bistre colour, and his hair and thick moustache were somewhat of a mouse-skin hue. Whether it was the occasion or not, we cannot say, but his face, figure, and voice dwelt long in Cecil's memory. And now, to obtain some of that food and other refreshment of which he stood so much in need after a day of such terrible work, he joined a group of officers of his own corps, who were lounging on the grass near a fire, at which their servants were

preparing a meal for them, and all made Cecil—the hero of the hour—most welcome, proffering him their flasks and cigar-cases.

Singular indeed was the group, and striking too, on which fell the fitful flashes of the adjacent watch-fire, for night had fallen, and the firmament overhead was full of brilliant stars.

German, French, Italian, Serb, and English could be heard, amid the group, chattered in turn, and sometimes all at once. Rich and picturesque in contour and colour were some of the uniforms, and they were worn by men of several nations who had come to serve the newly-proclaimed King of Servia and Bosnia. In the uniform of his infantry there was a Nassauer, who had won his laurels and his iron cross at the gates of Paris, in the war of 1871; Guebhard, a captain of Lancers, a man closely shaven save his moustache, with a silent manner, and most unpleasant expression of face; a dark and handsome Bohemian baron, armed with a quaint family sword of fabulous antiquity, now captain of a Bulgarian band, wearing a sheepskin cap, a richly broidered blue jacket, and loose trousers that had once been white, with pistols and yataghan in his girdle. There were a couple of Russian Lancers in red, and a Hussar in a sky-blue jacket, laced with yellow, who wore Crimean medals and had been lads, no doubt, when our troops went up the heights of the Alma, and were too politic, or too well-bred, to show the real hatred they secretly bore to all Britons; and in the Servian uniform, as captains, with three silver stars on their scarlet-faced brown tunics, were two ex-officers of our own Foot Guards, whom we shall call Stanley and Pelham, who—in search of a new sensation—had come out to see life (and death too) in Servia; there was an English ambulance doctor in the truly awful chimney-pot hat of civilization; and though last, not least, the ubiquitous correspondent of a London paper, in a kind of uniform—a frogged coat and forage-cap—with a revolver at his belt, and a case of writing materials slung over his shoulder, as jolly and as much at home with everyone as if he had first seen the world and been weaned in a Servian

bivouac, and ready to join with hearty goodwill a few who struck up 'La Belle Serbe,' the national chant of the country, to an air of great antiquity.

A light or two in the distance indicated the locality of the rather meanly-built village of Boboviste; and ever and anon cries and shrieks on the night-wind indicated that of the battle-field, where the ambulance-parties, doctors and nurses, were at work among the wounded and dying—Christians and Moslems alike.

The ex-guardsmen were chatting gaily together, and it seemed like a leaf out of the book of his old life to Cecil as he listened to them.

'A regular wanderer's club this, by Jove!' said one, laughing; 'made up of all sorts. I little thought to find *you* here, Stanley.'

'As little did I expect to find you.'

'Well, I suppose, with us both, it has come of backing the wrong horse too often—the little villa and brougham at St. John's Wood—the brougham with its three-hundred-guinea horses, and all the rest of it.'

'Not with me,' said Stanley; 'I found myself riding sixteen stone, and wished to bring down the flesh somehow. Besides, I was never much of a home-bird.'

'No,' assented the other, expelling his cigar-smoke in long concentric circles; 'but there is a novelty in all this new work here, with a vengeance. Only think, Stanley, in London, a few hours hence, would find us at the opera, at a crush in Belgravia, or consecrating the time to billiards, to the joys of Bacchus, and the chaste salutes of Venus, by Jove!'

'A devil of a business that last Turkish charge was,' said Pelham; adding, in a low voice, 'I shouldn't have cared if that fellow Guebhard had been knocked on the head—well, unhorsed at least, to-day; he is a cantankerous brute — bad form, very.'

Cecil looked at the officer of Lancers indicated, but knew not then that a time was coming when he would heartily share Pelham's wish.

'This is not your *baptême de feu*, I believe, even in Servia?' said the latter to him, suddenly.

'No—I have received that baptism before,' replied Cecil.

'Where?'

'In India.'

'Indeed! What regiment?'

Cecil remembered the mode of his leaving the beloved corps; he felt his cheek flush hotly, and, affecting not to hear the question, turned to the war-correspondent of the London daily, who was making notes for ulterior press purposes, and took from Cecil's own lips his modest detail of the charge in which he saved the lives of General Tchernaieff and Count Palenka—all of which episode would doubtless appear in the illustrated papers from sketches 'made on the spot, by our own artist,' whose immediate whereabouts was Fleet Street.

'How those Montenegrins fought to-day!' exclaimed Pelham, after a pause; 'armed with their sharp yataghans they came on like a living flood, after delivering their musketry-fire, and then flinging away their firearms, fell on with their blades in the smoke, precisely as the Scottish Highlanders used to do of old.'

'We'll have to write home about all these things.'

Cecil smoked in silence, and thought what home had he, or to whom could he write save to one who dared not receive his letter!

Amid this easy kind of talk, ever and anon the cries of pain—long-drawn moans, ending in a half-scream—came on the breeze from the adjacent battle-field.

'We shall hear the howling of the evil *vilas* to-night,' said Guebhard, with a grim smile, as he took the meerschaum from his moustached mouth.

'Who are they?' asked Cecil, whose knowledge of Italian and German stood him in good stead amid the polyglot kind of conversation that went on around him.

'Don't you know?' said Guebhard, a little superciliously; 'but it is a Servian idea—superstition if you will—that spirits so named come at midnight to exult over the slain; these are

the hideous and fiendish *vilas*, for there are others that are handsome and good.'

Coffee and cigarettes discussed, and a bottle or two of *vina* drunk to wash down mutton-chops fried in a flat earthen pot with a wooden handle, stuck into the hottest part of the bivouac fire, Cecil repaired to the place where his troop had picketed their horses, and looked after his own, which Tchernaieff had sent back to the bivouac. It was unbitted and munching some chopped forage; he relaxed the girths, and, rolled in his great coarse trooper's cloak, lay down on the bare earth beside it, though rain was beginning to fall. He was sore in every limb, and weary with the events of the day. He was without a wound, but many a buffet, blow, and strain, got he knew not how, began to make his bones ache now, as he thought over the stirring events of the day, and gave himself up—as he too often did—to sad and harrowing reflections.

Mary and the Cameronians—the regiment and Mary! was it the past life or the present one that was a dream? So far away did the old life seem now, that though some of the events we have related happened but a few months since, years seemed to have elapsed since Mary's love-kiss lingered on his lips on that twilight evening in Edinburgh, and when he listened for the last time to the sound of her voice—the voice that had been for a time, and was still, the music of his life.

Oblivious of the pouring rain and sodden bivouac, he lay there thinking not of the past battle, or the present glory now; he was remembering the regimental ball—the lights, the music, the swift tender expression of Mary's eyes as she swept through the dance with him—their first and last dance, the returned pressure of her soft hand, the touch of her hair on his cheek; all the exultation of the time, and more than all, her secret visit to him in the old grey fortress of the city!

Could she but see him now!

His hopes—if he had any—his plans and desires, the scenes around him, his companions and his circumstances, were all changed now, as thoroughly as if he had been born in a new or

other age. The world rushes past so fast now (for steam destroys time and distance), that his troubles were beginning to seem old; or as if the whole of his former life had passed away, and that if he was to cut out fortune, fame, and at least food, in the new one, the old life could not be forgotten too soon.

But Mary Montgomerie was the central figure in that former world still.

'How completely the romance has died out of my life!' he thought; 'and our love, it seems so like a dream to me now—but a sweet and beautiful one; a dream that can come no more, yet I am glad that I have had it. I would that I had a flower her hand has touched—a glove or a ribbon she has worn! Could I but know that on my dead face such tears as hers might fall!' he added, as he gave way to his dismal thoughts, and sooth to say his other circumstances were dreary enough.

The pouring rain had long since extinguished all the camp and bivouac fires, and was adding to the miseries of the wounded and the dying. He had covered his horse with a blanket and made a pillow of his holsters, and with the flaps of his Servian forage cap tied over his ears, lay there sleepless and heedless of whether he was kicked, or trampled upon, by his charger's hoofs, or the hoofs of others; while ever and anon the deep thunder grumbled over the spur of the Balkans, and the red lightning flashes lit up vividly, for a moment, the waters of the fast-flowing Morava, and a strange tower close by—a tower of human skulls, erected to commemorate a victory over the Servians by the Turks under Comourgi.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A MYSTERY.

It was six in the morning of the following day. From the eastward came a blaze of glorious sunshine; the rain had ceased about midnight; the blue sky overhead was cloudless; shadows strange and darkly defined fell to the westward from rock and

tree; the Morava was glowing in golden light; but by its margin lay the battle-field with all its horrors—a place that no sunshine could brighten.

Cecil was roused from sleep by Captain Mattei Guebhard, who announced that General Tchernaieff required his presence at head-quarters forthwith.

'For what purpose?' asked Cecil.

'How can I tell!' was the sulky rejoinder; 'you will learn when you get there.'

The truth is, that this Mattei Guebhard, who was—justly, as events proved—cold in the king's service, had been unhorsed in one of the charges on the previous day, and had come a little scurvily out of the action, having failed to rally or reform his troop; thus, though he dared not to sneer at Cecil, he was jealous of the honours he had won, but never could have conceived how little the ex-Cameronian valued them.

There is perhaps more hate at first sight in this world than there is love at first sight; and somehow Mattei Guebhard felt a curious hatred of Cecil, who was aware at the same time of having a most decided repugnance of him. Yet they exchanged cigars, and picked their way across the battle-field, where the dead were being buried in trenches; the peasantry were stealing arms and whatever they could lay hands on; where the scared vultures were hovering, angry and expectant, overhead; and where all the hedgerows, hollows, and ditches were, as usual in every battle-field, strewed with those mysterious scraps of papers, that are the sport of the passing breeze.

What they are, no one cares to inquire, not even plunderers and burial parties, who fling them contemptuously aside, after searching the pockets and other repositories of the slain. They may be only Orderly Room reports, and parade returns; but too frequently they are the last letters from mothers and sweethearts, or wives—letters full of love and prayerful tenderness, to those who can peruse them no more.

It was the first general action that Cecil had ever been in, and the field to him looked awful, in the sweet bright morning

sunshine; and the idea occurred to him, that if it be true—and we cannot doubt it—that to the Creator the fall of a sparrow is not a matter of indifference, what must that of a human being be? Yet, there they lay in thousands, butchered, hacked, and in some instances torn out of the semblance of humanity, by cannon shot and shell.

'Here we are!' said Guebhard gruffly, cutting short his reflections.

In a tent, round which a lancer guard was posted, dismounted, and leaning on their horses, with some staff-officers about him, Tchernaieff was seated at a table, and was in the act of sealing a long and official-looking blue envelope. Close by lay the body of a favourite staff-officer, for separate interment. A sheet covered it, and the dull outline of the profile, and the up-turned feet, showed plainly and ghastly to the eye. A veteran soldier, of great experience, and much stateliness of manner, he received Cecil politely and cordially, shook his hand, proffered his handsome silver case of cigarettes, and then said,

'To business.'

A portion of the letter was to the effect that he had appointed Cecil to serve on his staff, as an extra aide-de-camp, *vice* Colonel MacIver, popularly known as 'Tchernaieff's Scotchman,' who had joined the Russian army at Kischineff; and his first duty in his new capacity was to be the bearer of despatches to Belgrade; and Cecil bowed, and muttered his thanks and gratitude.

'This packet contains my report of the battle,' said Tchernaieff, with military brevity, rising to end the interview ere it was well begun; 'the casualty lists, and, more than all, my *plan* for our further operations, if approved of, by his Majesty the King.'

Guebhard's face was a study for a painter as he heard all this, in the background, with hawk-like eyes, and ears that quivered, so intently did he listen.

'You will take the road by Resna and Paragatin,' said the

general, speaking pointedly and emphatically; 'speak to none on the way; save for what you want—food and fresh horses; let no one join you on any pretence, or attempt to turn you from your path. Here is the route chalked out for you, the seven towns through which you have to pass, ere you reach Belgrade. Remember and be wary, as I have found you brave and trustful.'

'Take this ring,' said Count Palenka, coming forward, and drawing a valuable Russian diamond from his finger: 'I cannot give you gold medals or crosses like the king or his excellency the general; but I may insist upon your wearing this, as a personal gift from myself—the gift of gratitude for a life gallantly saved at great peril.'

Flattered by the high trust so suddenly reposed in him by Tchernaieff, Cecil, for the first time since he had set foot on Servian soil, felt his heart fill with something of the fire of his wonted ambition; but he knew not that he was selected, as a stranger, for this perilous and important duty; and still less, perhaps, did he know that there was a rival and pretender to the throne of Servia, in the person of Prince Georgeovitch, who had scouts, adherents, and secret supporters everywhere.

He looked at the war-map, with which every staff-officer was furnished, and saw that the distance between Belgrade and the temporary head-quarters of Tchernaieff (who next day was to begin his march to Alexinatz), was, in all, about a hundred miles, as the crow flies, through a wild, disturbed, and rather lawless country, by steep, rough, and heavy roads; yet, if tolerably well mounted, he hoped to perform the duty, and overtake the army, in four days at the latest, and this he said laughingly to Pelham and Stanley as he bade them adieu, and, quitting the camp, disappeared on the road to Resna.

The army advanced ten miles to Alexinatz, where a daring *alerte*, culminating in a regular foray, was given to the Turks within their own lines; but several days passed on, and became weeks, without Cecil re-appearing at head-quarters. He left few behind him to surmise as to the cause of this—

still fewer to regret him, though all believed that he must have been cut off on the way—but how?

'I shall be deuced sorry if that poor fellow comes to grief,' said Pelham; 'he seemed a gallant soldier, and every inch a gentleman. Curiously reticent about his antecedents, though; he laughed seldom, and when he smiled, did so as if smiles belonged to his past rather than his present life; but that he was an army man was evident—he had all the cut of it.'

'Had—don't talk in the past tense yet,' replied Stanley; 'he told us he had been under fire in India.'

'Has left the service under a cloud, perhaps—was the scapegrace of the family, probably. My family has one: I was that evil spirit in mine.'

'Any way, I do wish we had him back.'

The two Englishmen eventually offered a handsome reward in Austrian ducats for some intelligence regarding their missing comrade; and it came, vaguely, to the effect that two wood-cutters, three weeks back, had seen a mounted officer, answering to the description of Cecil, attempting to ford the Morava near Palenka, about forty miles off, and struggling with its current just as the sun went down, an event in these lands followed by instant darkness.

'Near Palenka?' said Captain Guebhard, with a frown, and then a cunning smile, as if questioning himself.

'Did he fairly cross?' asked Pelham.

'Who can say?' replied Guebhard; 'and if so, why has he not returned?'

'Were the bodies of a man and horse found in the river?'

'The wood-cutters said no; but I'll ride to Palenka and make inquiries, if Tchernaieff accords me leave,' he replied, turning away.

'Why is *he* so solicitous in the matter?' observed Pelham; 'his dislike of our absent friend has been pretty apparent to me.'

'The devil only knows his object; but I don't like his smile.'

'With his cunning black-beady eyes and bistre-hued visage, this Guebhard reminds me of a half-nigger fellow who was gazetted to the Dragoon Guards, when I was in them before joining the Coldstreams. We were anxious to get rid of him; but he was sly as old Nick, slippery as an eel, and cautious as a lawyer. At last one evening we all came to mess with our faces painted copper-colour or black, and with huge stick-up collars, to the astonishment of the waiters and of him too; but he took the hint, and sent his papers into the Horse Guards next day.'

So Cecil's fate remained as yet involved in mystery.

But that Guebhard did get leave 'to search' was evident, as the two Englishmen saw him quitting the camp soon after, attended by two or three mounted Montenegrins, melo-dramatic looking cut-throats, armed with rifles, pistols, and yataghans, clad in tattered garments with sandals of cow-hide, unkempt, unwashed, black-bearded, and ferocious in aspect.

'By George!' said Pelham, 'I should not like my *safety* to be looked after by such fellows as these!'

CHAPTER XXXV.

ON DUTY.

After carefully loading his pistols, and scrutinising closely the trappings of his horse, a fine, fleet and active animal, Cecil bade adieu to the army of Tchernaieff, and took his way westward on his lonely mission.

But for his forfeited position (forfeited as he had always felt, by no fault of his own) and lost love—the lost life as it seemed—how exciting and joyous, to a young and ardent spirit, such a task as that he had in hand, with such adventures as it promised in wild Servia, would have been; for Servia, though nearly half the size of Scotland, is yet a kind of *terra incognita* to the world of Europe generally.

'What will be the end of it all for me?' he thought, as he

looked around him on the strange land to which he had come to begin life anew—the world again.

Yet his spirit began to rise in spite of himself, as he proceeded at a hand-gallop in the pure morning breeze, and he felt that life was not without some zest after all.

Here and there great forests bordered the way, with little valleys opening between, wherein, as being warm and sheltered, the tobacco-plant is cultivated. The country seemed lonely generally; more than once, however, groups of wild-looking and well-armed peasantry and workers from the salt and copper mines passed him; but during this part of his journey he met with nothing exciting, save at the little town of Tjuprga, for so it figured on his map, though he utterly failed to pronounce it, and into which he rode just as the sun, a great round globe of fire, was sinking behind the hills.

On repairing to the only *cafane* or hotel in the place, he found a Russian Dragoon officer taking his departure therefrom, and prior to doing so, about to lash with his heavy whip a pretty little waitress, whom he accused of cheating him out of two copper piastres.

This was more than Cecil could endure; he drew a pistol from his holsters and called to the Russian to face him; but, muttering something about 'an island cur,' the gallant Ruski spat at his feet in token of detestation, and galloped away.

'And am I the comrade of wretches such as this!' thought Cecil, as he dismounted and found that he had accomplished thirty-five miles of his journey.

After a repast of hashed duck and caviare (having, as usual there, to use his own clasp-knife and pocket-fork), and after a bumper or two of strong red wine with the natural soda-water, which comes from many springs in Servia, Cecil lit a cigar, and, divested of his arms and tunic, gave himself up to reflection—and, sooth to say, he had as usual plenty to ponder over—while watching the sunlight fading out in the little street of one-storied houses, mere huts built of white-washed clay, and which he knew were too probably without beds, tables, or

chairs, and furnished with little more than an iron pot, in which the inhabitants cooked, and out of which they ate everything.

Carefully securing his door against intrusion when night fell, he slept on a divan with his rug and cloak over him and his sword and pistols under his head for a pillow; and next morning after settling his bill for a few copper piastres (one hundred and twenty-eight of which go to one British sovereign), he was again in the saddle and pursuing the road to Bratisna.

The next day saw him without any incident—somewhat to his disappointment, certainly to his surprise, at least. After passing through Kolar, and then Semendria, as his horse was breaking down, he was compelled to halt there for the night, within twenty-four miles of his destination. But the halt was not without interest, as there for the first time he saw that river so famed in history, the magnificent and dark-blue Danube, the waves of which 'have witnessed the march of Attila, of Charlemagne, of the Lion of the North, and the armies of imperial France; and whose shores have echoed to the blast of the Roman trumpet, the hymn of the pilgrims of the Cross, the wild halloo of the sons of Islam, and whose name is equally dear to history and to fable.'

Reining up his horse upon a slope, he watched the river for a time, flowing there between mountains clothed with forest trees, its blue waters in the vista washing in some places beaches of yellow sand, with pretty, toy-like hamlets sleeping in the sunshine, and then rode in to Semendria, which occupies a low peninsula in the river and is overlooked by a quaint old castle, in remote ages the abode of the kings of Servia, and which has since been taken and retaken, battered and bombarded by Turks and Hungarians in turn.

Next morning saw him approaching his destination, the stately city of Belgrade. Towering over its picturesque masses, over the spires and domes of more than a hundred Greek churches and Moslem mosques, steeped in the blaze of the morning sun on one side, and with deep shadows on the other,

rose its citadel on the summit of a precipitous rock, surrounded by a lofty wall with flanking towers, a triple fosse, and a magnificent esplanade, four hundred yards in breadth.

On the summit waved the Servian tricolour, pale-blue and red together, with the white outside.

Around on every side spread lovely gardens. As he approached this famous frontier city, the scene of so many bloody sieges, Cecil could not but smile, in these our days of vast projectiles, at remembering how great a feat it was thought of the Scoto-Austrian Marshal Loudon, when in 1789 he opened his first parallel there, at one hundred yards from the glacis. That stately citadel was the scene of many awful atrocities perpetrated upon Christians, and Cecil ere he left it was shown the place where Rhigos the Greek was sawn asunder limb by limb; and so late as 1815, thirty-six unhappy Servians, among them the grandfather of Count Palenka, were impaled alive in violation of a pledge given for their safety.

Anxious to return and to be rid of his despatches, Cecil certainly did not loiter, and in a few minutes he found himself traversing the streets of timber-built houses, and those lines of open wooden stalls which compose the shops, the barber and coffee-vendor alone having glazed fronts, and where the nationalities are so distinctly marked in the motley population, the laughing shopkeeper in his tiny Servian bonnet, the suave insinuating Greek banker or merchant in his red skull-cap, and the haughty, sallow and bearded armourer, blacksmith, or baker, always Turks, as their white turbans show.

His national uniform, the time and the cause—news of battle—a great victory over the 'Turkish dogs' by the Morava, spread like wild-fire, and Cecil had no difficulty in finding his way to the palace of the prince, or, as he was then universally named, King Milano, which is simply a handsome house with back and front gardens, near the War Office, on the boulevard leading to the Semendria road, which is bordered by double rows of trees.

As Cecil approached this edifice, important though his mission, some delay occurred in his presentation, as a Circassian

Prince with six hundred horsemen—all wild-looking and picturesque Tcherkesses, had just come in to join the standard of King Milano. He was a very handsome young fellow, wearing a busby of black Astracan fur, with a coat of the same material (worn over a shirt of the finest linked mail), with a row of cartridge tubes across the breast of it; his sabre blazed with precious stones, and he wore a pair of white kid gloves that would have done credit to Regent Street.

Then came Cecil's turn, and by officers of the staff, wearing blue coats and red trousers, and French kepis with waving plumes, he was ushered into a stately apartment, and was graciously received by Milano, who gave him his hand to kiss, and read the despatches aloud to the group around him, with considerable emphasis and the most intense satisfaction.

Photographs have made all so familiar with pictures of the Servian King, that no description of him is necessary. Suffice it, that he was all the more warm in his reception of Cecil on discovering that he was a Briton, and learning the services he had performed in the recent battle. Milano was then in his twenty-second year, having been born at Jassy in 1854. He spoke French with fluency, having been educated at Paris, where his studies were interrupted by the assassination of Michail Obrenovitch in 1868, after which he was proclaimed Prince of Servia by the Council of Regency.

Replies to the despatches would be given Cecil forthwith, and meantime an aide-de-camp was desired to conduct him to the Krone Hotel. There, weak and weary with his long and rapid journey, Cecil gladly flung himself upon a divan, and after a repast, made terrible by the inordinate seasoning of red pepper and red capsicums, or *paprikas*, with a bottle of Negotin claret, made from grapes that always grow on stony soil, he began to enjoy himself at an open window which faced the Gardens of Belgrade, which are certainly very beautiful.

Servian officers and Servian ladies were promenading there, or eating sweetmeats at marble tables, and reading the Servian *Istok*, while the band of the Royal Guard played in the gardens,

and now and then the national air of 'La Belle Serbe' was called for and greeted with applause.

To Cecil, the people seemed pleasing in aspect; their eyes were blue or hazel, with chestnut hair and oval faces that were generally smiling. The men, tall, robust, and handsome; the women, slender, delicate, and all wearing graceful head-dresses.

Lovers were loitering there, and flirtations were in progress, as they are everywhere all over the world, and many were there who seemed happy as the yellow-throated bird that sung in a mulberry tree close by where Cecil lingered over a cup of coffee and a cigarette, and thought of the newness of his surroundings, and the strangeness of his fate, and his purpose in being there —if he had a purpose at all!

It was strange—passing strange! In that field by the Morava he set no store upon his life—not even for Mary's sake, as she was lost to him as completely as if she were dead—yet how many who had circles of relations and friends to deplore them, and who doubtless set all necessary store upon their own lives, had perished there, falling 'as the leaves fall when forests are rended.'

Was he the same Cecil Falconer, who, but four months before, had been marching to the drums of the Cameronians?

An end was put to his reverie by the appearance of the aide-de-camp, who brought him the king's despatches, and that evening he quitted Belgrade. As he gave a last glance at the wayfarers who loitered about the streets and at the doors of the cafés, cigarette in mouth, with their richly inlaid swords and long pistols stuck in their showy scarves, and with muskets slung behind them, looking very picturesque—he thought they would, at the same time, be unpleasant fellows to meet in some lonely place in a land where police are scarcely known.

He took a farewell glance of the Danube, studded with tiny villages, their churches, and minarets, with Servians on one side fishing in curious little boats, Hungarians on the other tending their flocks, with vast mountains towering in the distance, and then rode quickly on what was now his homeward way.

Continuing his journey along the left bank of the Morava, the close of the second day found him, as he supposed, within thirty miles of Deligrad (from which General Tchernaiff had moved to fight his victorious battle), when it became painfully certain to Cecil that he had too evidently taken a wrong path and lost his way, in a very lonely district, where few persons were to be seen, and where neither his German nor Italian availed in making inquiries.

Of the Roman road he had been pursuing—a road old as the days of Trajan—all traces had disappeared, and he found himself in a narrow forest path, over-shadowed by huge pines, where he would be certain of *not* finding a guide, as such places are avoided at night, as being the haunt or abode of the *vilas*, evil spirits who can assume all shapes, but especially that of the cuckoo, according to Servian superstition.

Hence it was, perhaps, that two wood-cutters whom he saw, fled at the approach of a mounted figure, looming tall in the forest—and these were the men who pocketed the Austrian ducats of Pelham and Stanley.

Fires glowed redly here and there upon the distant hills—doubtless from copper and iron mines; but twice, isolated rockets described their fiery arcs athwart the darkening sky; what this might indicate, he knew not; but urged his horse onward by the narrow path, which descended abruptly now.

He thought he could hear the murmur of a great current—the flow of a river; but could discern nothing then, between the stems of the trees, or in the starless sky overhead—for in Servia the twilight—the gloaming, as the Scots call it—is very brief, and when the sun goes down, utter darkness with amazing rapidity envelops all the scenery.

Now an involuntary cry escaped him, as his horse, though at a walk, toppled heavily forward, and before he could respire a second time, he and it were both immersed in the current of a dark and rapid stream, too evidently the Morava.

The bank over which they had fallen was too steep to make the least attempt to return that way possible. He took his

feet from his stirrups, held up his horse's head, and guiding it gently with the stream and towards the other side, uttered an exclamation of joy, as he felt its feet touching the ground. But ere he left the stream, the trunk of a tree that came surging past, struck him from the saddle; yet he clutched his reins, and stumbled ashore, bringing the horse with him.

He was safe, but, after a brave man's natural emotion of gratitude to God for that safety, a cry of dismay escaped him, on finding that his sword-arm hung powerless by his side.

It had been dislocated by the force with which the tree had struck him. In a wild and unknown place, he was now helpless as a child, and something very much akin to consternation fell upon him.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CASTLE OF PALENKA.

WHILE his heart sank within him, at the idea of being so suddenly rendered helpless and unfit for active exertion, in such a place and at such a time, his first thought was to ascertain that Milano's despatches were safe and dry. With difficulty he found that they were so, in his sabretache, and after putting fresh cartridges in his pistols, to be ready (though one-handed now) for any emergency, he took his horse by the bridle, and somewhat disconsolately led it up a slope, towards where some lights were twinkling, high in the air above him, to all appearance, and about a mile distant.

Up, up the steep slope he struggled, by a path that led through an open gateway, and pursued a winding direction, till he reached a terrace or plateau, before a castellated edifice of striking outline and considerable dimensions, to all appearance the abode of some Servian magnate or landholder; but he was so faint with pain and exertion, that all he looked on seemed to be whirling around him.

An appeal to the knocker, a huge ring in the mouth of a grotesque face, brought a servant, a tall and robust fellow, in a

species of livery, to the door, and by the lights in the vestibule that opened beyond, he stared with equal surprise and alarm upon the dripping visitor, who in somewhat polyglot language, stated the predicament he was in. Another and another came, and ere long they made out that Cecil was an officer of the Servian cavalry—a messenger from the king, who had met with an accident; and as such he found himself rather abruptly ushered into an apartment of palatial aspect, where two ladies, an elder and a younger, were intent upon a game of chess, by the light of a large shaded lamp, the globe of which was supported on the shoulders of a silver statuette of Atlas; but both now arose with astonishment expressed in their faces.

Cecil at that time felt himself as if in a dream, or only half conscious of what was passing around him; he remembered afterwards his words of explanation, the commiseration of their replies in the most softly modulated Servian (a soft language at all times) and he found himself committed to the care of 'Theodore,' the man whom he had first seen, and who proved to have been an old soldier, who had seen many broken bones in his time.

Cecil's sodden uniform was removed, and his hurt at once seen to, by the valet and an attendant of the lady of the house, who had been for a time one of the good sisters of the *Santas Kreuz Militar*, and knew precisely what to do, so fortunately for Cecil he was in good hands.

By them, gently, but firmly, the partial dislocation of the arm at the shoulder—fortunately it was only a partial one—was speedily reduced, a process during which Cecil nearly fainted. Cloths dipped in vinegar were then applied; some wine was given him, and soon after he was left to repose; but he, who had slept on the bare ground for months past—though now in a charming room and luxurious bed, with a coverlet of rich silk lace, lined with pale blue silk, surrounded by luxuries to him unknown since he quitted Britain—felt sleepless, and as the hours passed by they were hours of pain and anxiety—pain to endure, and anxiety to be gone on his duty.

Great weariness weighed down his eyelids, and pain would be exchanged for what he thought at times was a dream, or sound sleep; and as parts of the dream, he saw the walls of a handsome room, a little Greek oratory with a *prie dieu* before it; and therein the figure of some saint, with a gilt halo of horseshoe-shape around the head, and a tiny pink lamp burning before it, and the girl, Ottilie, for such was her name, watching and flitting about it noiselessly.

She was more than pretty, with a violet-coloured velvet jacket, embroidered with gold, under which she wore a habit-shirt of the softest white cambric; and her dark sheeny hair was braided close round her small head, not under, but over a skull-cap of crimson-cloth.

These, and other details, Cecil took note of next day, rather than on the night in question; and closing his eyes, he strove to collect his thoughts and think—think of what, or of whom, but Mary Montgomerie?

He was now to deem as past and gone for ever the love that made his veins to tingle and his heart to thrill in his bosom; yet he could not but remember with intense tenderness the last kiss she had given him, and the time—one of those, so some one says, that are given us by God to help us by the sweetness of their memory, in weary days to come.

She was so far away—so far away! It seemed he could but think of her as the living do of the dead—perhaps as the dead may do of the living.

To him the slow hours were passed restlessly— almost without repose. 'There is,' says a writer, 'a strong contrast between a sleepless night and the first hours that follow it. Everything appears from a different point of view! The phantoms of night become again familiar objects, in the same way as in the region of ideas, things gigantic reassume ordinary proportions. We fancy we are contending with the impossible, and find ourselves in presence of paltry difficulties. We believed that heroism was demanded of us, and find that it is simple duty we have to accomplish.'

So it was with Cecil when day dawned, and brought with it ideas that were practical.

Betimes came Theodore with hot coffee on a silver salver, which he proffered with a military salute, and the information that 'his excellency's' horse had been attended to at the stables, and there was his uniform, dry and brushed to perfection, with his pistols and sword, burnished as only an old soldier could burnish them, for Theodore had served with the Austrian army in Bohemia, and been twice wounded at Sadowa, where his regiment was that remarkable one which perished nearly to a man under the new and terrible fire of the Prussian needle-gun; with all of which facts he informed Cecil, while re-dressing his hurt and assisting him to attire.

He also informed him of something else—that he was in the family residence of Michail, Count Palenka; and so, by mid-day, with his arm in a sling, Cecil expressed his anxiety to thank his hostess, the widowed mother of the count, for her kindness to him.

He announced himself as 'Sub-Lieutenant Cecil Falconer, of "Tchernaieff's Own," aide-de-camp on the staff,' and was ushered into the presence of the ladies whom he had seen on the preceding night.

'The preserver of my son's life in the battle by the Morava!' exclaimed the countess, coming forward and taking his left hand between both of hers, and gazing upon his face with humid yet beaming eyes.

'I only did my duty, madam, though the count was pleased to think I did more,' replied Cecil, 'and bestowed this ring upon me.'

'My birthday gift to my dear brother!' said the younger lady laughingly.

'Your hand has worn it then?' asked Cecil.

'Since I was a little girl in Vienna.'

'That enhances the value of it to me,' said Cecil gallantly, with a bow; 'but surely it must have been a world too wide for one of your fingers.'

'True; but I had it enlarged for Michail.'

'Now, during the natural well-bred inquiries concerning his injury, and so forth, Cecil had opportunity for observing his hostess and her daughter Margarita.

The countess, though verging on fifty, was still very handsome, for the Servian women, by their mode of life, can prolong their beauty beyond the average climacteric. She wore a long flowing dress of black cashmere, with a train behind, and confined at the waist by a silver girdle; a frill of softest muslin was round her throat, and a square of fine white lace arranged like a widow's cap was pinned over her head, with the ends falling on her shoulders. She had clearly cut features, soft dark hair lined with silver, fine eyes, and a shapely figure still.

Margarita was a womanly-looking girl of more than middle height, having a full and rounded figure of remarkable grace and elegance of bearing, set off by quantities of delicate lace and flowing drapery. Stately in walk and in every movement, she was a brilliant, flashing, and imperial-like beauty, with large and liquid eyes, a clear-cut aquiline profile, masses of rich, dark hair, and a small mobile mouth, with pouting, red and rather sensuous lips; and she was self-possessed, refined, and highly-bred.

Educated at Vienna—for Servia was long a province of Austria (after being shuffled backward and forward between the Emperor and the Porte)—she was highly accomplished, according to the European standard, and it was but too evident that she welcomed the advent of Cecil's visit—especially as a young Briton—for the women in Servia are reckoned as being quite inferior to the men, fit only to be the plaything of youth and the nurse of old age; a peculiarity of manners that has not arisen from four centuries of tyrant Turkish rule, but seems to be inherent in old Slavic custom, such as still appertains in Russia. But European ideas and fashions are now the rule at Belgrade, thus the country must change fast; and Margarita had been the reigning beauty when there as a maid of honour to the Princess Natalie, the wife of Milano, and daughter of a wealthy banker in Odessa.

The conversation soon drifted back to the great Servian victory, and the narrow escape of Count Palenka and the general.

'How courageous it was of you to risk your life to save theirs; how self-devoted to give Tchernaieff your horse!' said the countess.

'It is not often a soldier has two such strokes of good luck at once,' replied Cecil.

'Had you no fear for your own life—no dread of dying?' asked the countess.

'No, madam.'

'Why?' asked Margarita, who had scarcely spoken yet.

'Because it is as natural to die as to live—to die as to be born; and life has now not many charms for me,' he added, with involuntary sadness or bitterness.

'Now—had it more once?' asked Margarita.

'Yes—many—nearly all that I could desire, contrasted with it now.'

'I grieve to hear you say so—you, with life before you still,' said she, eyeing him with growing interest, while slowly fanning herself with a great round feather fan, though the atmosphere was cool enough.

'You cannot leave this place for days yet,' said the countess, after a pause. 'Margarita shall write to the count and request him to tell General Tchernaieff of your accident. Meantime she and I will nurse you,' she added, with a kind motherly smile, 'and make you well and strong.'

Cecil sighed as he thanked her, and feared that his sword-arm would be useless for many a day; and indeed he was incapable of mounting a horse as yet.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MARGARITA.

THOUGH named the castle of Palenka, the abode of the count of that name partook more of the character of a fortified house,

as it had been built by his grandfather, an old heyduc, on the basement of a Roman or other ancient fortress, and had a legend connected with it, similar to that told of the castle of Skadra, that to propitiate the *vilas*, a beautiful young girl had been built up alive in the foundation of one of the towers; and Margarita, one day, showed Cecil the identical place in question.

All the rooms had parqueted floors, polished like a coach-panel. In the dining-room, or hall, was a large round table of massive form and baronial aspect, and a lofty oak buffet, full of shining plate, quaint crystal goblets, and quainter china.

The drawing-room was fitted up somewhat in the Turkish style or taste, for though it had a grand piano and orthodox European chairs, a low divan of yellow satin ran all round it, and many of the most beautiful objects of art that Vienna could produce adorned it. Trophies of arms hung everywhere, many of them very old, many of them collected perhaps by the veteran heyduc, who fought often in battle under Kara George, and who was impaled at Belgrade; for here we may mention that these heyducs were outlawed and deemed robbers by the Turks, and like the Scottish caterans, imagined that in setting law at defiance they were only combating for a principle of independence, and not acting dishonourably; and most of them, like old Michail, the Heyduc of Palenka, made it their boast that they robbed only the rich Moslem invaders, but were generous to the Servian poor; and for military services to the House of Austria, his son was created a count by Francis I., the ally of Britain against Napoleon.

Cecil's mind was made comparatively easy by the fact that Margarita had written to her brother the count, detailing the mishap which detained him at Palenka; but the letter was never received, so he knew nothing of the mystery that enveloped his disappearance at head-quarters: and day followed day very quietly in that sequestered abode among the forests, and so far from any town.

The old countess, who had a truly Servian and holy horror

of all strangers, thawed speedily to Cecil, and declared him one of the most delightful companions she had ever met, even in Vienna.

A thorough Servian of the old school, she was full alike of religion and superstition, and observed most scrupulously the numerous fasts of the Greek Church—the four annual terms of abstinence, and every Wednesday and Friday, and never uttered a holy name without crossing herself.

She was never tired of telling her beads, and if she awoke in the night when the wind was high, she trembled as she thought of the traditional vampire—a body which the Serbs supposed to be possessed by an evil spirit, which comes forth from the tomb of death to suck the blood of the living, till traced, taken, and burned to ashes. She believed in the existence of old Servian witches, who could steal away men's hearts, and close the wounds through which they had drawn them.

'I fear there are young witches in Servia who steal away men's hearts and leave the wound an open one,' said Cecil, who, but for the presence of Margarita, would soon have become intensely bored at Palenka, as the chief, if not only, visitor there was the pope or priest of the nearest village, a blue-eyed and long-bearded old man, who could only speak Serb, and whose demigod was the Archbishop of Belgrade.

Accustomed for months past to the misery and wretchedness of the Servian camp, to Cecil, the dinner-table with shining white cloth, plate, crystal and ivory knives, under a flood of light from a rose-coloured chandelier, seemed the luxury of Sybaris; and for several days he had his food cut for him by old Theodore, or by the pretty hands of the girl Ottilie.

Both mother and daughter were intensely loyal in the cause of Milano and Servia, and hated the Turks as bitterly as ever the old heyduc himself could have done.

'It was my brother Michail who recaptured the cross at Belina last year, as no doubt you know?' said Margarita.

'I was not in Servia then — what was the episode?' asked Cecil.

'It was in the famous battle of July. When the Turks ravaged Belina in Servia, they carried off a great cross from the altar of the church, and came on to the assault of our Servian troops, bearing it in front, and shouting, "You cannot fire on your God—you dare not fire on your Prophet!"'

'And our poor Servians, rather than commit sacrilege, dared not fire, and stood perishing in their ranks!' said the countess.

'Till our Michail, at the head of a chosen band, burst, sword in hand, among the dense mass of red fezzes, recaptured the cross, and brought it into the lines of Milano, over heaps of dead and dying; and then—but not till then—did the Servians pour in a dreadful fire of shot, shell and rockets, beneath which the columns of the infidels melted away.'

When Margarita spoke, even with energy, as she often did, there was always something sweet and innocent about her, with a certain quiet dignity, and a touch of softness in her expression, which, when taken with the bright and lofty character of her beauty, rendered her wonderfully attractive.

She soon discovered that he was musical, and they sang frequently together, while she played the accompaniment; and when he gave forth the notes of the Master of Ravenswood's farewell to his lost love, and gave it with a power and pathos that, though she had heard many of the best tenors at Vienna sing the same air, yet none had seemed to do so with such tenderness and heart-broken despair—and when their eyes met, her heart began to thrill beneath the ardour of his gaze, for Cecil, when he sung thus, gave his whole soul to it, and thought of Mary—Mary Montgomerie only, or it might be the memory of the mother that taught him; but to the ear of Margarita every note seemed, as she once said, 'to be a lover's wail over a lost love.'

On one of these occasions, Cecil saw some pieces of dance music lying about, inscribed with the name of Captain Mattei Guebhard.

'The captain—he is a friend of yours?' he remarked.

'He was here on a visit to Michail once—yes,' she replied,

with a shrug of her shoulders, and dismissed the subject. 'I grew weary of him; he was jealous as Jelitza!'

But Cecil observed next day that all those particular pieces of music had disappeared.

Always fond of female society, Cecil found the daily association with this accomplished girl a source of the purest pleasure, and he strove, but in vain, to find traces and resemblance in her to Mary Montgomerie; for Margarita was larger, darker, more brilliant and colossal in her beauty, if we may use such a term.

She had quite a repertory of Servian legends, to which she recurred from time to time, and told with a piquancy which her foreign accent and foreign graces of manner enhanced; and one day she took him to a little lake—a dark and stagnant tarn, overshadowed by great trees, and near the Morava, which she affirmed to mark the grave of the jealous Jelitza, so famed in Servian song.

Remembering her reference to this personage when she spoke of Guebhard, he asked who she was.

'Oh, the very incarnation of jealousy!' said Margarita; 'she could not bear even the brotherly tenderness of her husband Paul for his young sister, and in order to alienate him slew his favourite courser, and charged her with the act. But Paul gave credit to his sister's denial. Then she slew his falcon, and blamed his sister therefor; but Paul would not believe her. And at last she killed her little baby, and left in its tender body a knife which Paul had given his sister, whom he now slew in the wildness of his fury, by having her torn asunder by wild horses. But in the end, the jealous Jelitza perished by the same fate; and then we are told, "that wheresoever a drop of blood fell from her, there sprang up the rankest thorns and nettles. Where her body fell, when dead, the waters rushed and formed this lake so still and stagnant. O'er the lake there swam a small black courser; by his side a golden cradle floated; on the cradle sat a grey young falcon. In the cradle, slumbering, lay an infant: on its throat the white hand of its mother;

and that hand a golden knife was holding." All these apparitions were visible here, once yearly, on this stagnant lake, till the days of my father, who had it blessed by the Archbishop of Belgrade, since when they have been seen no more.'

All the legends Margarita told him were wild and gloomy; yet the Servians seemed to Cecil a lively people, and together they often watched the reapers singing merrily in the fields, and dancing, to the fiddle and native bagpipe, when work was over, the *kolo*, the national dance of the people.

Both were young and both were handsome; the acquaintance so suddenly begun ripened rapidly; but Cecil, unmoved by the brilliant attractions of Margarita, and by the perilous influences of propinquity, never for a moment felt his heart waver in its loyalty to Mary, though he deemed her lost to him, and all other human love was dead to him now.

When the September evenings closed in, and the old lady, clad in costly velvet trimmed with beautiful fur from the Balkans, was reading her missal in a corner, Cecil and Margarita, if not at the piano, were generally seated close together—very close, an observer might have thought—at a tripod table of green marble—playing chess, he with his left hand, for the right was yet in a sling; and watching, which he could not fail to do, her lovely little hand, so white and delicate, a very model for a sculptor, pushing the pawns and knights about, while all was still without, save the flow of the Morava on its way to join the Danube.

Between these two, when the countess was not present, we are compelled to admit that the conversation sometimes waxed perilous, notwithstanding Cecil's resolute platonism, when the large liquid eyes of Margarita, under their thick dark fringes, met his, and her scarlet lips, which we have said were rather sensuous, quivered and smiled, with an expression all their own; and one of those perilous times was when, somehow, they fell on the subject of love—a natural one enough between a handsome young fellow and a beautiful woman.

'There are times,' said Cecil, after a pause, in reply to something Margarita had said, 'when men dare not love.'

'Dare not—when?' asked Margarita, as she made a false move, and had to play her king.

'I mean when to love is rashness, or would be presumption,' said he, thinking, as no doubt he was, of Mary and her vain old guardian.

'There may be rashness, but there is no presumption in any man offering his true and honest love to any woman, even a princess.'

'But would the princess accept it?' said Cecil.

'Perhaps,' replied Margarita, looking at him with one of her smiles, and then drooping her lashes; 'love is romance,' she added.

'Then I have lived the romance of my life,' said Cecil, a little bitterly, and perhaps unwisely, 'and have only its grim realities before me now.'

'Already, and you so young?' she asked, with dilated eyes.

'Already!'

'I trust you mistake, and that romance may come again,' said she softly.

'It is utterly past, so far as hope goes now.'

'Does the grass of the grave grow above it?' she asked after a pause.

'In one sense—for my hope is buried.'

'I do not think any grave is so deep that we can bury in it all hope of another love and other happiness,' said Margarita, perhaps misunderstanding him, and making a rather leading remark, which Cecil—though not obtuse on such matters—failed, in his utter preoccupation, to perceive. Margarita bit her lip, and shoved her pawns about. She, accustomed to adulation and much admiration, was rather piqued by Cecil's coldness.

'All the world is alike to me now,' said he, rather absently; but she gathered conviction that he was neither married nor engaged.

'Are you so much of a misogynist that you cannot even be the friend of a woman?' she asked.

'I have not said so,' said he; 'nor am I in any degree a misogynist,' he added, with animation.

'Then you can conceive a friendship?'

'Yes, and a most tender one—and go where I may,' he added, coming rather to the point, as Margarita thought, 'I shall never forget the friendship I have conceived for you.'

'That emotion is not always a lasting one.'

'Why—how?' he asked.

'Because it often ends where—love begins,' she replied, with a laugh and a downcast smile.

Cecil felt his heart beat quicker.

'Oh, by Jove!' thought he, 'this sort of thing won't do—what must I say next? This is making awful running, and I have only been a fortnight here!'

But at that moment the countess, who had dropped asleep over her missal, awoke, and the conversation changed.

Truth to tell, Cecil was beginning to be somewhat scared, rather than flattered, by the brilliant *œillades* and rash speeches of Margarita. He did not quite understand the romantic impulses that came of her half-wild Servian blood, though partly tamed and tempered by a fashionable European education. She was totally unlike any other woman he had met before, and he could not determine to his own satisfaction whether she had conceived a secret fancy for him, or was only seeking to entangle him in a flirtation, for her own amusement, as she had perhaps entangled Mattei Guebhard and others before him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CAPTAIN GUEBHARD.

WHEN Cecil thought of the despatches with which he had been entrusted by royal hands, of the approved plans of the campaign which Tchernaieff anxiously and eagerly awaited;

when he reflected, too, how he, a foreigner, a stranger, a humble and nameless volunteer, had been promoted, decorated, and honoured with high trust; and when he thought of the ready suspicion, jealousy, and mistrust of the Russians and half-oriental Servians of whom he was now the comrade, he groaned in agony of spirit over the helplessness which caused his detention at Palenka, and neither the society, the rare beauty, nor the blandishments, for it was fast amounting to blandishment—of the dazzling Margarita could console or wean him from the path of duty, or drown the sense of peril, perhaps, involved.

All the young men of Belgrade, and all the 'eligibles' of elsewhere, were with the army of Milano as officials or volunteers, all fighting the infidel Turks 'for freedom and Servia;' consequently, save the old pope, Palenka was without male visitors just now; and in the adjacent village, a place with a name not easily pronounced, it was 'noised abroad' that the strange officer who had so suddenly appeared at Palenka had succeeded in winning the heart of the beautiful Margarita, who had been hitherto deemed so unimpressionable by all, and it was thought not to redound much to the credit of the old countess, or to that of the youth of *La Belle Serbe*, that such a prize should be carried off without a struggle.

'The young Herr Lieutenant is playing with fire here!' said the grey moustached Theodore to Ottilie gloomily.

'How so?' responded the girl gaily; 'is not youth the season for love? and our mistress is beautiful.'

'And manhood is the season for marriage, girl; but he dare not marry her, and she dare not marry him,' he added grimly, twitching his beard; 'and I wish him well away from Palenka!'

'Why?'

'Because he is a fine fellow—every inch a soldier—and I would not see evil come to him.'

'Evil?'

'I said evil, and I know—well, what I know.'

The curiosity of Ottilie was piqued, but Theodore was in no mood to gratify it.

To Margarita, Cecil was a species of interesting enigma. He had some sorrowful past, which he carefully kept from her; she felt that instinctively, and she was never weary of hearing him tell of the places he had been in—India, Scotland, England, and Italy—and smiled sweetly and softly at his descriptions of distant lands, that she had only heard of at school. She knew that he was accomplished, and the superior in education and ideas of any man she had yet met; thus, she admired and evidently liked him very much: but the villagers and the household were adopting conclusions too abruptly.

She had a perfect consciousness of her own beauty—a beauty of that remarkable type and quality which seems to belong to no country, so rare and striking was it—and, to enhance it, she had already decided that a few of her most becoming toilettes might be necessary for her purpose, which was no doubt to attract and dazzle, as she felt that his presence at Palenka would greatly brighten the hours she deemed lost, by a temporary exile from Vienna, in consequence of her brother's presence with the army.

Preoccupied though he was by thoughts of another, and only anxious to take his departure, as he now hoped to do in a day or so, her coquetry became one day very apparent to Cecil, and it amused while it flattered him, as she invited his attendance on her at the piano.

On this day she had arrayed herself for conquest; and whether it was the well-assorted costume she wore and the subtle perfume of some fragrant flowers she held in a white and ungloved hand, or the soft light in her dark and liquid eyes, but Cecil thought certainly that he had never seen her look so piquante, brilliant, and lovely, with a loveliness picturesque and all her own.

She began to run her fingers over the keys, and then suddenly exclaimed, with a little laugh

'Oh, this will never do!'

'What?' asked Cecil, as he hung over her.

'I have been playing with one glove on—how absurd! Please to help me off with it,' she added coquettishly, holding out her hand to him in a pretty, helpless way.

Such a tiny, lavender-tinted glove she held forth to him to unbutton. Faultlessly it fitted the white dimpled hand, and reached far up the arm, with many little white buttons, the undoing of which was now the task assigned to him; and as he felt in his hand the firm, white, tapered arm, he saw a little mocking smile about her beautiful mouth; and, as their eyes met, something he read in hers made Cecil feel inexpressibly foolish. He must, he thought, say something tender—but why?

He was just undoing the last button, when Theodore came in with a card on a silver salver, announcing 'der Herr Capitan Guebhard;' and the figure of the latter was now seen looming darkly in the doorway, as he took in the whole situation and advanced slowly, with his spurs and sabre clanking.

'Playing with hearts, as usual,' said he, with a laugh that had no sound in it, as he took her hand and bowed curtly to Cecil.

'How dare you say so!' she replied, while a flush crossed her face, and an expression of irritation came into it for a moment.

After a little pause, the visitor said, after she requested him to be seated:

'I have just heard from old Theodore of what had befallen the Herr Lieutenant. I have also heard, but at head-quarters, that he has important despatches from the King to General Tchernaieff. There was a fear that you had lost your way, or fallen into the enemy's hands, and I volunteered to come in search of you.'

'For that I thank you, Captain Guebhard; and as for the despatches——'

'You will please to hand them over to me.'

'Pardon me,' said Cecil, and paused, while a dark gleam crossed the eyes of Guebhard.

'How is your arm—well, I suppose?' he asked, with the slightest approach to a sneer.

'If well, I should not be loitering at Palenka.'

'You are nearly able to handle your sword, I presume?' he continued, in a more marked tone, while playing alternately with the tassel of his sabre and his long black moustache.

'Very nearly, Captain Guebhard; but it is not the habit with British officers to bring their swords into a drawing-room among ladies.'

'Very likely; but I am a Servian officer, and I hope you consider yourself one now.'

There was something quietly offensive in the tone and bearing of Guebhard that irritated Cecil. The latter remembered the pieces of music inscribed with the monogram of the captain, and their disappearance too. He also remembered that Margarita had spoken of Guebhard's jealousy—that he was jealous as Jelitza, of the Servian legend and proverb; and Cecil thought there could be no jealousy without some love, or what passed as such.

What were, or had been, the relations between Margarita and Guebhard in past time—and how were they situated now? That he came freely and installed himself as a privileged *ami du maison* was evident, and as such he was warmly welcomed by the countess. But on what footing—as a friend of the absent count, as the *fiancé* of Margarita, or as a relation of the family?

So Cecil felt puzzled as well as irritated, and when again asked for his despatches, he plainly and firmly declined to give them up to Guebhard, though a superior officer.

'I fear I have interrupted your performance,' said the latter, abruptly changing the subject; 'does the Herr Lieutenant sing?' he asked of Margarita.

'Yes—with power and skill,' she replied promptly; 'but when you entered I was just about to sing to him.'

'What?'

'"The Wishes."'

Cecil urged her to begin, and placed the music before her,

on which she sang both sweetly and effectively the little Servian song so-called, and of which the first verse runs thus, and is peculiar in its idea:

'"Oh that I were a little stream,
That I might flow—my love—to him!
How should I dance with joy when knowing
To whom my sparkling wave was flowing!
Beneath his window would I glide,
And linger there till morning-tide;
When first he rouses him to dress,
In graceful garb, his manliness—
Then should he weak or thirsty be,
Oh, might he stoop to drink of me!
Or baring then his bosom, lave
That bosom in my rippling wave!
Oh, what a bliss if I could bear
The cooling power of quiet there!"'

And as she sang, Guebhard, who doubted whether these six wishes referred to himself, listened and looked on with a visage, the lowering expression of which reminded Cecil of Hew Montgomerie under somewhat similar circumstances.

The captain of Servian Lancers had, as elsewhere stated, a silent manner and an unpleasant expression on his usually pale face, and analysis—not necessarily a very keen one—detected several defects in it. Among these, apart from his cunning black beady eyes, were thin cruel lips, and a general aspect of the face being perpetually a mask. He was not appearing quite to advantage just then, for if his manners were quiet, and generally polished, he had the stealthy gentleness and grace of a cat, and his bearing was suggestive of the adage that 'still waters run deep.'

He was a man of mixed race, and not a pleasant one to have, as Cecil felt him to be, a secret enemy; for he was half Italian and half Bulgarian, with a considerable dash of the Ruski. Cecil could little conceive how far his secret enmity was yet to carry him; but he did not relish being reminded of his duty by Captain Guebhard, and still less to have hints given that he should soon leave Palenka behind him.

To allow the unexpected visitor to approach Margarita, and

freely converse with her if he wished to do so, Cecil drew near to the countess and joined her in watching the reapers in a field, but he could not help overhearing, though said *sotto voce*, something that had reference to himself.

'Playing with hearts again, as I said before?' whispered the captain.

'Don't be absurd!'

'I remember what mademoiselle was at Vienna.'

'Then your memory, like your sex, is—is——'

'What?' asked the captain softly.

'Treacherous.'

'And so the Herr Lieutenant has been idling here,' said Guebhard, 'while we were enjoying ourselves by the Morava?'

'Enjoying yourselves?' asked Margarita.

'Yes—cutting up the Turkish dogs. Life is too short to let slip any opportunity nowadays.'

'Especially life in Servia—it is full of perils; and so you were solicitous for *his* safety? How kind!'

'I was solicitous to see you. I heard that he had been seen in the vicinity of Palenka.'

'By whom?'

'Some wood-cutters—so I made the excuse and came here.'

'Thus shunning your duties in the field?'

'Not more than he does.'

'With a disabled arm?'

'For you to nurse,' replied Guebhard, with a smile on his lips and a glitter in his eye, that, had Cecil seen it, might have warned him of mischief to come; and low though they spoke, he heard his despatches referred to more than once; thus he was scarcely surprised when he changed places with Guebhard and rejoined Margarita at the piano, that, under cover of a very brilliant sonata, she questioned him about them.

'Where are those despatches about which Mattei Guebhard seems so anxious?' she asked.

'In my sabretache.'

'And it?'

'Is in my apartment,' he replied, with surprise.

'As you cannot wear it constantly, take them therefrom,' she said, in an emphatic whisper.

'Why?'

'They may be abstracted.'

'By whom?'

'I do not—cannot say by whom,' she replied, with half-averted face.

'Do you suspect?'

'Yes.'

And a crash on the instrument closed a conversation, on which Cecil resolved not to lose a moment in acting, and repairing to his own room, transferred the packet from the sabretache attached to his sword-belt, to the breast-pocket of his uniform tunic.

He felt grateful to her for the interest Margarita had thus evinced in him, but he was sorely puzzled to know why Guebhard was so anxious to obtain the documents committed to his care, and he was soon convinced that her suggestion had not come too soon, when about two hours after he discovered the Servian captain in the act of quitting his—Cecil's—apartment.

'You here, Captain Guebhard?' he exclaimed, with surprise and indignation in his tone, all the more so that he read a baffled and confused expression in the face of the other.

'Pardon me,' said he, bowing and passing on, 'but the dressing-bell has rung for dinner—I was in haste, and mistook your apartment for mine.'

It might be so; but Cecil thought it a curious circumstance that his belt and sabretache, which he had left hanging on the wall, were now lying on a sofa, and he smiled as he felt the packet safe in his breast, and resolved to secure his door for that night, the last he meant to spend in Palenka.

Cecil resolved to be in every way on his guard against this man Guebhard, and yet ere the night passed he was very nearly having a quarrel with him—a quarrel which, but for some forbearance on the part of the former, might have ended in a resort to pistols between them, after the ladies had retired and he and

the captain were left to their cigars and wine; but the latter preferred raki, and under its influence he lost much of his subtle suavity and oily politeness, and the real Bulgar in his blood came out.

And, sooth to say, Cecil was not sorry when the ladies did retire, for Margarita, either to please and amuse herself, or to tease and anger Guebhard, had addressed the whole or nearly the whole, of her conversation to him, though it ran chiefly on the progress of the war.

Lying or half-reclining on a divan, with a rummer of raki and water at hand, a cigar between his lips, and his cunning almond-shaped eyes half-closed, though they glittered brightly, Guebhard, after some remarks about Margarita and her singing, to all of which Cecil listened silently, said:

'She is a dazzling girl—don't you think so?'

Cordially, Cecil admitted she was so.

'I wonder blood has not been shed about her long ere this!' he exclaimed, in a curiously suave yet vicious tone.

'Bah!' said Cecil, 'people don't fight duels nowadays.'

'In your cold-blooded country, perhaps,' was the quietly scornful interruption.

'And we shall have daily blood enough spilt in other ways,' continued Cecil, without heeding him.

Guebhard drained his rummer, refilled it, and was not long in thinking of something else offensive to say, and gave each long, black, lanky moustache a vigorous twist, as if he gathered courage from the performance.

'You have not been idle while here, apparently, Herr Lieutenant,' said he, with one of his curious smiles, while carefully selecting a cigar from his case and proffering Cecil one.

'I do not understand you, Captain Guebhard,' replied the latter.

'You will understand this, that I heard your names—yours and Margarita's—bandied about in the common *cafane* of the next village.'

Cecil coloured with anger, but said quietly: 'We are not accountable for the gossip of the vulgar or the ignorant.'

'It is a pity, however, to compromise a young lady by your attentions, Herr Lieutenant.'

'Who *do* you mean?' asked Cecil angrily.

'Who but Margarita Palenka?' replied Guebhard, suavely, but decidedly, emitting great circles of smoke from his lips.

'Compromise her?'

'I have said so, Herr.'

'With whom?' asked Cecil, endeavouring to suppress his annoyance; 'her mother or—you? I am here, like yourself, as a guest, and I do not recognise your right, Captain Guebhard, either to advise me, or suggest to me any line of conduct.'

'If I attempted to do so, it would be as your friend, and still more as the friend of Count Palenka's sister.'

Guebhard's voice was becoming thick under the influence of the fiery raki, and he sat for half-a-minute glaring at Cecil in a curious half-defiant and half-stolid manner, especially when the latter was not looking at him.

'At all events,' he said bluntly, 'General Tchernaieff expects you to report yourself in due course at Alexinatz.'

'Did he send you to me with this message?'

'No.'

'Then I require no advice from you, sir, as to any course I may choose to adopt.'

Guebhard's eyes glittered like those of a rattlesnake beneath their half-closed lids, and Cecil began to eye him back steadily and sternly. 'Captain Guebhard,' said he, 'to recur to the first matter in hand, the rumours at the *cafane*, what is your peculiar interest in the matter?'

'What matter?' stammered Guebhard.

'My intimacy—friendship—what you will, with the sister of Count Palenka?'

'Simply that I love her!' exclaimed Guebhard abruptly, with all the impulse of his really passionate nature; 'that I love her, and will brook no rival!'

'Then you need not fear me as one,' said Cecil, laughing aloud; 'and if it will ease your mind, be assured that I had

already arranged to leave this place to-morrow; my arm is so nearly well now, that I shall be able to reach my saddle with ease. And to end this rather absurd conversation,' he added, as he rose to retire for the night, 'be assured, I repeat, that on my honour you need fear no rival in me!'

'He lies, in his heart—the English dog!' thought Guebhard, as he silently gave Cecil his hand; 'and there are no lunatics like women, when an interesting foreigner comes their way. But I'll mar his wooing, between this and headquarters—by all the devils I will!'

'And you leave this to-morrow for the front?' said he.

'To-morrow, by noon, at latest; and you, Herr Captain?'

'I—I go on to Belgrade; but you ride by Resna?'

'Yes.'

The captain, whose voice and steps were alike unsteady, withdrew, and Cecil was not ill-pleased that they had parted without the quarrel which the other seemed anxious to provoke.

Next morning he found that the captain had quitted Palenka at an early hour, and soon after he was further to learn that Guebhard had *not* taken the road to Belgrade.

Ere noon next day, old Theodore was leading Cecil's horse, accoutred, to and fro before the door.

'We are so sorry that Palenka is about to lose you,' said Margarita, in her softest tone to Cecil, who had been saying some well-bred things, but in the genuine fulness of his heart, for the hospitality he had received.

'It is most kind of you to say so,' he replied, doubtful of how she might lead him on, for her eyes and manner were full of coquetry at the time,

'Don't you regret it?' she asked, with a would-be shy, upward glance.

'After all your kindness to me, a stranger, I should be most ungrateful not to do so!'

'But we may meet again,' said the countess, joining in the conversation.

'Perhaps,' said Cecil, with one of his sad smiles; 'but considering the chances of war, of life and events here, too probably never.'

Margarita stood by fanning herself, as she usually did. She knew that a fan suited well the style of her beauty, and she seldom neglected to display her skill in the use of one, and she had fans of all colours to suit her dresses.

So his sojourn at Palenka was ended now.

Intelligent and well read, Cecil was also master of that kind of small talk which marks a man of the world; and he had pleasantly wiled away many an hour with Margarita, the memory of which would haunt her in the time to come. It was a companionship, brief but pleasant, which she would be sure to miss, and to recall with genuine regret.

'She has been trying to lure me into a flirtation *pour passer le temps*,' thought Cecil, as he rode down the slope on the summit of which Palenka stood; 'and I am well rid—well clear of her alluring meshes.'

At a turn of the path he waved his cap in farewell, as he knew that her soft bright eyes were watching him from a window; but he knew not that from another point eyes were watching his departure in which a less pleasant expression might have been read.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE BLACK MOUNTAINEERS.

THE path by which he proceeded was narrow, rugged, often ascending rocky steeps and descending into rapid water-courses; thus his progress was slow and devious. It was often bordered by forests of oak, ash and yew—the latter imparting a great gloom to the scenery; it was overshadowed by hills, particularly those of Mount Mezlanie, with alpine peaks that were covered with thyme, rosemary, and other aromatic plants. Here and there he saw goats perched upon fragments of rock,

their long beards waving in the wind; and occasionally when the country became open, he passed bare fields whereon the oats and millet had been reaped.

So he was once again in his saddle, with his sword by his side, his pistols in his holsters, and the world of wild life before him! His pistols? He thought it as well to look to them, and on doing so, found that the cartridges had been withdrawn from the chambers of both!

By whom had this been done, and why? He could not suspect the old soldier Theodore; but he did suspect Guebhard of tampering with some of the grooms. Forewarned thus, he at once proceeded to examine and reload them carefully.

As he rode on, he thought with more amazement than irritation of his conversation with the captain over-night, and of that personage's declaration of his regard for Margarita—his open jealousy, and threat of brooking no rivalry. Whether she had loved Guebhard in the past time, or whether she loved him still, was a matter of such little consequence to Cecil, that he scarcely thought about it at all.

'Could I,' he reflected—'could I but forget my own past, with its brightness and gloom—though the brightness was Mary, the gloom my mysterious disgrace—I might yet have some hope in the future here—even here! My foot is already on the first step of the ladder, and military rank, perhaps glory itself, may yet be mine. I may yet gather one leaf of laurel, and who can say but that a corner in the Temple of Fame may await me too!'

He laughed at the thought. He was, in fact, too young to feel quite despairing yet. His spirit rose with the exhilaration induced by a rapid ride; and he at last began to think with ardour of the mess of the old corps seeing his name in the public prints—the exultation and commendation of his pluck and bravery by Leslie Fotheringhame, Dick Freeport, and others—even his story going the round of the men's barrack; and more than all, of what would be the emotions of Mary Montgomerie!

Then, at the thought of her, he let his reins drop on the mane of his horse, and sinking into reverie—a reverie induced by the stillness around him—left the animal to proceed at its own pace, and even to pause, and crop the herbage by the way-side.

Never again, too probably, would the threads of their life cross, even for a moment, for Mary seemed as far removed from him now as heaven from earth. Then it would seem difficult to realise the idea that his life could pass on, unto the end, without Mary in it; and vaguely there would spring up in his heart the wild tumultuous hope that if he strove, even in this new and barbarous land, she might yet be his.

How often in the wretched Servian bivouac, through the long hours of weary night, had he lain under the stars communing in bitterness with his own soul, if we may say so; and out of the starlight Mary seemed to come to him vividly in fancy—Mary in her sweetness and loveliness, with all her gentle, soft, and winning little ways—her grace of movement, her tenderness of tone—the Mary that, too probably, he should never meet more.

Yet they had been so happy in their secret love of each other—the love that in its flush needs nothing more than to be mutual, 'though marriage seemed distant as death;' and as distant as that the former seemed now, though the risk of death was nearer than he thought.

Lost in reverie, he had proceeded thus a few miles, ere he became aware of the unpleasant fact that he had too probably lost his way, for the road-tracks diverged and crossed each other so frequently, and he met no one of whom he could make inquiries, till at a turn of the path he came suddenly upon two Montenegrins, who were on foot, under a tree, against which their muskets rested, and who were in the act of taking some food, each with the bridle of his horse over one arm.

Both were as repulsive-like men as one could meet, especially in a place so lonely, and the sudden appearance of Cecil seemed to afford them considerable interest. They were evidently two

of the 'Black Mountaineers,' belonging to the body which served in the army of Servia, and they bore those arms which their race are never without, even in their most peaceful occupation: a musket, pistols, and yataghan—a short and sharply curved flat sword, without a guard. They wore old and tattered garments of no particular colour, sandals of raw hide, were black-bearded, cunning, and forbidding in aspect—looking every inch like what the Montenegrins are in reality, savage barbarians, who in battle mutilate the fallen, and who never crave mercy, nor yield it, for when one is severely wounded, to save him from the enemy, his own comrades cut off his head.

As the language of these pleasant people is a dialect of the Servian, Cecil had not very much difficulty in making them comprehend the dilemma in which he found himself. They exchanged curious smiles, and then pointed out the way which led, they averred, to Resna.

Cecil gave them a few piastres; but, as he rode off, he saw them snatch up their muskets from the trunk of the tree, and in hot haste proceed to charge them, which they did somewhat slowly, as the weapons were old-fashioned muzzle-loaders. When again he looked back, both were taking deliberate aim at him over the saddles of their horses!

A double flash and double reports followed, and two bullets whistled past: one was flattened out against a rock, like a silver star; the other ripped some bark from a tree. And now, deeming discretion the better part of valour, while his heart swelled painfully with anger and indignation, he put spurs to his horse and drove it along at full speed.

Ere he could well reflect upon the course to pursue, two more muskets flashed out of the coppice ahead of him: 'ping! ping!' the bullets whistle past; they came from rifled barrels, and he could see two more mounted Montenegrins.

Cecil's heart began to beat wildly now; he had no coward's fear of death, though a great horror of being butchered thus, helplessly and without defence. Yet he was not without hope of escape; he remembered how many he had seen miss the

running deer at Wimbledon, and resolved to trust to the heels of his horse: but soon it cast a shoe, and the other began to clatter, for evidently the nails had been loosened!

The abstraction of the cartridges from his holster pistols, and this tampering with his horse's shoes, he could account for now, when remembering that the villain Guebhard had been in the stables betimes that morning; and it was but too evident that he had thus beset his returning path, and these precautions showed that, notwithstanding the number of his followers, he had a wholesome appreciation of Cecil's pluck, skill and bravery.

Another shoe was shed; his horse began to flounder now, and he heard the pursuing hoofs coming fast upon his rear. Cecil knew from experience the cruelty of which the Montenegrin nature is capable. He had heard, and seen, how Turkish wounded and prisoners had been shorn of their lips, noses, and ears, by the sharp yataghans of those so-called Christians, the Black Mountaineers, whose favourite household ornament is a Turkish head, dried in smoke; and who often bury their prisoners up to the breast and make targets of them at a hundred yards; and such a fate might now be his if he fell into their horrible hands; and he knew not how many were in pursuit of him.

It was not impossible that Mattei Guebhard had thus beset the road to cut him off, in a spirit of jealousy, rivalry, and revenge; but it seemed more probable that his present desperate and lawless proceedings had some mysterious reference to the interception of the despatches. This fact proved an alarming puzzle to Cecil, who longed, sternly, eagerly, breathlessly, to have the captain alone with him, face to face, and within range of his pistols.

In hopes to baffle pursuit, he had quitted the direct road, or that which he supposed to be such, and wheeled off by a path to the left, but did so in vain, for they were following him fast, and his horse, shoeless now, failed to grip the loose soil of the way with its hoofs alone.

Outriding the rest, two were now getting unpleasantly close to him, as the path, a very narrow and winding one, began to ascend a steep spur of Mount Mezlanie. He rid himself of one of these by his pistol, but as he wheeled round in his saddle to deliver the Parthian shot by which he did so, he felt in his right arm a maddening pang of pain, and a cold perspiration burst over him.

'God!' he exclaimed, 'if it is thus with me now, how will it be if I come to use my sword!'

The second Montenegrin, fast and far outrode the rest, and without wasting time in using rifle or pistol, he came thundering full upon the rear of Cecil, whose horse, though fresh from the stable, after days of enforced idleness, and liable to resent the use of bit, curb and spur, was toiling up the steep and rugged path there was no quitting or avoiding. Cecil could see that it came close to the very verge of a precipice and then turned acutely to the left.

This he perceived just in time to save himself from a sudden and horrible catastrophe, by slackening speed, and guiding his horse, by bridle and knee, carefully round the perilous corner; while his pursuer, intent blindly on bloodshed and slaughter, came furiously up to the spot, and failing to turn the angle, being ignorant of it, or unable to check his speed, went over the precipice—headlong, horse and man—through the air, to find mutilation and death, where soon the vultures would be gathering, at its base, some hundred feet below.

His fate evidently made the rest more wary and caused some delay in the pursuit, which enabled Cecil to distance them considerably, as he pursued the pathway through a solitary glen; but he could see that they were still keeping him in sight, at a time when the afternoon was far advanced, and the darkness of a sudden thunderstorm began to obscure both sky and scenery.

CHAPTER XL.

CECIL COMES TO GRIEF.

AT this very time yesterday he had been hanging over Margarita at the piano, and busy with the numerous buttons of her long kid-gloves; and then listening to her coquettish song of 'The Wishes.'

Now what a change had come! He was a fugitive, pursued by men who were veritable human bloodhounds!

'No doubt about Guebhard now!' thought Cecil. 'Fool that I was not to quarrel with him at Palenka as he wished; and shoot him on the terrace, or anywhere else. But a time may come; nay, must come—if I escape—if I escape!'

And a time *did* come, when they were to meet face to face, though Cecil could little foresee, then, when and where it was to be.

It was plain enough that this subtle and ferocious fellow, half an Oriental, in the first moments of supposing himself supplanted by Cecil—already so successful in the field and camp—had resorted to the deep scheme of cutting him off and obtaining his despatches; spurred on by the intensity of the twin passions, love and hate—love for Margarita, and hate for a supposed rival, in more ways than one; and if successful, there was no knowing what foul stories he might circulate to blacken the honour of the dead, with Tchernaieff—stories that might ultimately find their way into every print in Britain!

To Cecil there was a bitterness worse than death in the thought of this; but he could little conceive that it was *not* for Tchernaieff, or any other officer in Servia, the fatal despatches and plan of the future campaign were wanted!

Cecil looked from an eminence; his pursuers were still in sight, but looking faint and distant, amid the gathering gloom.

'If it comes to the worst, I would rather be shot down than captured—could I be assured of being shot dead,' thought Cecil, as he rode steadily on, he knew not in what direction;

he could make out that his pursuers were five in number, and one was evidently Guebhard. 'Had I a good Enfield rifle, I could pick every man of them off at leisure from this, and then there would be a few less Montenegrins to trouble the world.'

These fellows had belonged, of course, to that Montenegrin contingent, five hundred strong, which had come into the camp of General Tchernaieff; but he being an officer as humane as he was brave, had been compelled to expel the whole force for their barbarous mutilation of the Turkish wounded, and many of them were now prowling about as idle freebooters.

These Montenegrins—men of the race which make such a stir in European politics at present—were literally savages of the *Zerna-gora*, as it is named, from the mountains clothed with darkest pine, which cover the greatest part of its surface—men inured to arms, hardship and cruelty from their boyhood—without religion or scruple, save in implicit obedience to their chiefs or leaders; and in camp and out of it they committed many an awful outrage, the report of which never found its way into the columns of the *Glas Czernagora*, or official journal of Montenegro.

Cecil knew that when leaving Palenka, he had, at the utmost, only some forty miles to travel, with a horse that was fresh and active; but its shoes had been tampered with, he had been driven from his proper path, and the difficulties of that he traversed were now enhanced, as a storm came on.

Black and heavy clouds overhung the savage landscape—for savage it seemed, in its utter solitude. For the hour, the sky became preternaturally dark, and remained so till night deepened; and far in the hazy distance the ghastly green forked lightning flashed with weird splendour about the peaks of Mount Mezlanie, and the thunder boomed sullenly in the valleys below; and once or twice, when he obtained glimpses of the winding Morava, its current seemed increasing, as if in haste to leave the storm behind it.

Then the heavy smoke-like rain came down with a species of roar on the earth, crashing through the foliage of the trees, for

hours after the time that should have seen our wanderer safe within the outpost of Tchernaieff; but wild though the storm, he welcomed it as a means of concealing him from his pursuers, for he felt that if overtaken, his arm was yet so feeble as to make him rather helpless. He was compelled to ride slowly now, and with a firm hand on a shortened rein.

The enormous pine trees towered skyward like giants, and seemed to assume something menacing in their aspect amid the gloom. Knotted and gnarled stems and roots also seemed to take the form of those grotesque monsters that figure in the forest through which Undine went; and in imagination perils mysterious and impalpable seemed to gather in the lonely path of Cecil, who was not without an active and fervid imagination.

At last he reached what appeared to be the border of the woodlands he had been traversing; the pathway grew broader; lights glittered out of the obscurity, and he could make out the form of a two-storied house, which he at once approached.

From the highway, as he supposed it to be, a modern gate gave access to a path through an orchard, as he eventually found, and in the centre thereof stood the house—the inmates of which, a Servian farmer and his family, received him with politeness rather than cordiality, and under the influence of the native distrust of all strangers, though he wore the brown Servian tunic of the patriotic army; but his pleasant and genial manner, and the fairness of his complexion, won him favour, and while his horse was being stabled, he soon found himself installed before a wood fire, drying his sodden uniform, while the farmer's wife prepared some food, and her spouse endeavoured to describe the way he must pursue to reach the outposts of Tchernaieff, near Deligrad.

The house was a snug one. A tile-paved entrance-hall gave access to a room off it with four shuttered windows; it was floored with red tiles; an iron stove stood in a corner, and all round was a divan covered with rugs and cushions.

'Well,' thought Cecil, as some food was set before him,

'there are worse things in this world than taking pot-luck with a Servian farmer!'

Youth and hunger alone made him relish the plate of hot *paprakash,* or chicken soup with tomatoes dressed with hot pepper, bread, cheese, and black coffee *à la Turque,* served up in pottery, the form of which indicated a vast antiquity in its design—for the jars, vases, and plates, glazed white and green, were all Roman in style, and might have been used by the Emperor Trajan.

But little archæology was in Cecil's mind then; he was thankful to his hostess for the meal she gave him, and was intent on the host's description of the route he must pursue on the morrow, and was in the act of accepting from the hands of the former a tiny dish of the famous sweetmeat of Kirk-kelisie (near the Balkans), boiled grapes formed in a roll with walnut-kernels, when a strange sound like a distant 'whoop' caught his ear, together with the tramp of horses' hoofs. Then he felt his heart leap and his colour change, or fade.

'Horsemen are coming up the hollow way,' said a peasant, entering in haste.

'Horsemen!' exclaimed Cecil, starting up and looking at once to his pistols.

'Armed, too—Montenegrins. I saw them by a glimpse of the moon.'

'Guebhard and his gang—my pursuers. I am lost!' cried Cecil, leaping from the table and buckling on his sword, as he looked hurriedly around him for concealment, defence, or escape.

His evident emotion and admission that he had pursuers renewed at once the inborn mistrust of the Servian household, who all shrank from him. Despite his uniform and the gold cross of Takovo, they imagined he must be a culprit, and felt neither disposed to conceal nor defend him. Even the gentle hostess now eyed him with horror, mistrust, and affright.

Cecil saw in a moment that he had nothing to hope for from his host, or the servants, among whom were four stalwart Ser-

vians; and just as he heard the noise of horsemen dismounting at the door, and the unmistakable voice of Guebhard summoning the horse, he hurried away to the upper story, and locking two doors behind him, resolved with his sword and his pistols to sell his life as dearly as possible.

By the noise and din below he became aware that his pursuers had greatly increased in number, and now indeed a violent death seemed close to him—terribly so, and his heart beat wildly.

'One can die but once,' thought he; 'and why should we shrink from what we cannot shun?' he added, involuntarily quoting Byron. If he perished in that obscure and secluded place, who would there be to regret him, save Mary? And then he thought of his comrades of the old Cameronians; but none would ever know his fate. There was something very bitter in *that* reflection, yet the memory of the regiment, and of his comrades, seemed to nerve him anew at this terrible crisis.

In the dark he sought about for furniture to barricade the room-door, if it was forced, and to form a barricade to fire over. A chest or two, a table and chairs, he piled against it, and then examined the window—it was small, narrow, far from the ground, apparently; but all was obscurity and darkness without, and unknown to him there was immediately beneath it a deep hole, formed by the farmer when digging for copper ore. But now two minutes had barely elapsed, when shouts and execrations fell upon his ears, together with the din of blows upon the first door he had closed.

It was speedily beaten in, and then the door of the room was assailed. It seemed stronger, and for a time resisted the blows that were rained upon it.

'He wears a diamond ring, the gift of Palenka, which will prove a fortune to whoever gets it,' he heard Guebhard say, in a loud voice; 'and he has a plan of the campaign, well worth a thousand ducats to me, and more to Kara Georgevitch!'

But his Montenegrins scarcely needed these incentives to outrage and bloodshed.

Through a hole in the door Cecil, for a moment, saw them

crowding and jostling in the narrow passage, by the light of a torch held by one of their number. Ferocious-looking they were, yet men of magnificent physique, in long white camises, open in front, with gaudy waistcoats below; their sashes filled with knives, yataghans sharp as needles, and brass-butted pistols; their faces inflamed by raki, their dark eyes gleaming like those of devils; their white teeth glistening; their wide blue petticoat trousers reaching to the knee, and their feet encased in thongs and sandals of hide.

A gleam of light flashed inward, as an axe clove a rent in the door, and thereat, for a moment, he saw the gleaming eyes and pallid face of Guebhard, and he fired full at it; but with what effect he never knew.

He fired again and again, at a venture, through the door, and so did his assailants; but their chance bullets went wide of the intended mark; while more than one shriek and hoarse malediction announced that his fire had told on the group wedged in the narrow space without; but now the door was yielding fast, and Cecil, aware that when once it was broken down he would inevitably perish by a death too probably of protracted mutilation and torture, threw open the window and resolved to drop therefrom.

Firing all the chambers of his revolver at the door, through the splintered gaps in which a red light was streaming now, he lowered himself down, just as two of his assailants came rushing round a corner of the house, intending, no doubt, to cut off his retreat; and quitting his hold on the window-sill, he fell down —down—he knew not whither; but it was into the excavation already mentioned, and there he lay for some moments, stunned, confused, and well-nigh senseless, and incapable of further thought or action.

Round the hole, wherein he lay, his pursuers gathered.

'Here he lies!' exclaimed Guebhard, 'stunned or dead!'

'A single shot to make sure!' said one, cocking his long brass pistol.

'Not one!' cried Guebhard imperatively; 'I hear cavalry

moving through the wood—perhaps those we might be sorry to meet. He lies still enough—some of our balls must have hit him—I saw blood in the room.'

That was the case certainly; but it was blood from the wounds of some of his own followers.

'Hark!' he added, as the sound of a cavalry trumpet was heard close by; 'here are shovels—cover him up—and when the horse are past, we can return and get what we want, at leisure.'

Cecil heard all this; he never stirred—scarcely breathed; and now he felt shovelful after shovelful of earth thrown upon him, cold, damp, and moist, as they proceeded, not to bury, but merely to cover him up, with the intention of concealing, as they thought, the dead body for a brief space.

No groan, no sigh, no sound, escaped him, while this horrible process went on; yet he felt a horror and dismay no language can depict, as he knew not how much soil they might heap upon him.

Unseen, or unnoticed by them, he eventually felt himself compelled to move his head, lest his face should be covered as completely as his body was; and then suffocation would ensue.

At last a great mass was shovelled in; his head was entirely concealed, and then Guebhard and his Montenegrins withdrew from the spot.

CHAPTER XLI.

NEWS AT LAST!

FROM such terrible episodes and scenes as those that close our last chapter, and from such a land of wild barbarity, we gladly turn homewards for a time.

It was summer, and the season had scattered its roses and their leaves lavishly over the old Scoto-French garden of Eaglescraig, for such it was, with its closely-clipped privet

hedges, its long grass walks, balustraded terraces, mossy sundials, and parterres, where deep box-edging was alternated by flower borders running along the paths, and where wall-flowers, sweet-williams, and tiger lilies, with moss and Provence roses, were varied by espaliers that in the coming time would be laden with fruit.

The summer was in its glory, but there was not much brightness within the house of Eaglescraig. So Cecil, who had latterly met with such scanty kindness from Sir Piers, was actually his grandson, and the honours of the old line were perhaps neither to die out, nor pass to a far-away branch, after all!

John Balderstone had proved all this, and great were the content and glee thereat among the old visitors of the mansion; there being no regrets for Hew being 'scratched,' as he called it, 'and out of the running now,' for his general bearing had rendered him obnoxious to everyone.

'So the whirligig of time brings about its revenge,' said old Tunley, the butler; 'pride always goes before a fall.'

'Yes!' coincided John Balderstone, with an angry smirk on his face; 'now, Master Hew may go to Hecklebirnie!'

'Where is that?'

'Three miles beyond—well, a very warm place, as our Scots proverb has it,' added the factor, as he drained a stiff jorum in Mr. Tunley's pantry.

Mrs. Garth rejoiced openly at the change that had come to pass.

'It would have been unnatural indeed,' she said, 'that a girl so sweet and sensitive as Mary should have been mated to Hew, whose action, nature, and habits would have jarred on her softer nature perpetually.'

And Sir Piers heard her, ever and anon, making such remarks as this, without according the angry response they would once infallibly have elicited; while to Mary the relief was inexpressible! But meantime, where was Cecil now? This question was ever in her mind, causing an aching, gnawing anxiety there, amounting to positive physical pain; and she

heard it daily on the lips of all around her, Hew excepted; and once in his cups the latter expressed to John Balderstone a fierce hope that 'the absent heir might be——'

'Stop, sir!' cried John; 'where?'

'Oh, anywhere,' replied Hew, with an angry gloom in his bilious-looking eyes; 'I am not particular as to climate, or locality.'

So far as Mary was concerned, his occupation was gone, like his hopes of everything now; and, gentle and tender though she was, Mary, remembering all the past, could feel no pity for him.

'Dear old Snarley!' she once exclaimed, catching up her pet terrier, and then talking *at* Hew; 'you, at least, have always loved me for myself alone—no thought have you of fortunes or acres, of rent-rolls and bank-notes; you would rather have a marrow-bone, than all—wouldn't you, my darling doggie?'

And Hew eyed her, and the dog too, viciously. He could no longer, as before, coarsely and vulgarly taunt Mary with the obscurity of Cecil's birth, now that it was proved beyond all doubt to be superior to his own; neither could be avail himself now, as before, of the general's countenance and support, since his rival was the real heir of line and entail, while he was but a penniless dependent.

How bitterly and unwillingly, again and again, he anathematised the hour, in which that—to him—fatal packet was so inopportunely discovered by John Balderstone, and its blighting contents brought to light!

Had it only, by fate, been left forgotten, unknown in its place of concealment, for a year or so more, all might have gone well with him; but now—now—he could only curse heavily and grind his teeth in the impotency of his wrath and the deep bitterness of his disappointment.

'All the world's a stage, and the men and women only players;' but he who had played the deliberate villain in the drama of Cecil's life as yet, was still unmasked, and Hew grinned with malicious triumph as he thought of that.

The generous Sir Piers felt that he owed Hew some reparation for the loss of his Indian appointment, and the heavy blight that had fallen on all the prospects once before him; and he hoped that if Hew would only settle down to work and study, that something—he knew not precisely what—might be done for him yet; but Hew, exasperated by the trick fortune had played him, and the humiliating change in his position, had taken heavily to the bottle of late, and his naturally savage nature became at times inflamed to the verge of madness.

Mary was inevitably lost to him now; and that which he deemed much more important—her money! But if Cecil could be removed—crushed—destroyed—thrust out of his path and of this life too—he, Hew, would again be the heir of entail—heir to Eaglescraig and the baronetcy.

But where was Cecil now?

Could he but discover him—could he but cross his path, he would not be over particular about how he got rid of him; and at such times dark and terrible thoughts possessed him.

To drown care, and as a source of excitement, he had plunged deeper into his dissipations; he had become a more frequent visitor at race-courses, where a very little of his own money went into the pockets of others, while a good deal of the money of others accrued to him, by some mysterious process. He also stuck to his card-playing—écarté being, as of old, his favourite game; and unless each rubber thereat represented a sum larger than he deemed sufficient to give zest to the game, even écarté had no charms for him.

Some of his escapades drew upon him the indignation of the general, and feeling himself all but discarded, his absences from Eaglescraig became longer and more frequent; so that none there knew precisely of his haunts or whereabouts, till the portly Mr. Tunley brought the startling intelligence one day that 'after a terrible bout of delirious trimmins, Master Hew was—or believed himself to be—dying, at the Montgomerie Arms Inn,' where he prayed the general in pity to come and see him once again.

Accompanied by a medical adviser and old John Balderstone, Sir Piers at once rode to the old posting-house indicated; and there, pale, wan, hollow cheeked, and with eyes unnaturally sunk and bloodshot, he found his once favoured protégé in a state that shocked him.

Hew was far from dying yet, as the doctor averred; and Sir Piers too—he 'had seen too much of that sort of thing up country, not to know all about it;' but, in his lowness and perturbation of spirit, Hew firmly believed that the hour of his demise was close indeed; and clinging to the hand of Sir Piers, while moaning and sobbing, he confessed how he had cheated and swindled often, and how he had maligned Cecil in many ways, and more than all, the cruel trick he had played him, on the night of the ball, by drugging his wine.

He uttered a veritable howl of dismay, and fell back in his bed, when he saw the sudden expression of horror, rage, and shame, that mingled in the face of the honourable old soldier, in whose heart there swelled up a great emotion of pity for Cecil.

He fiercely withdrew his hand from Hew's despairing and tenacious clutch, and started back a pace from the bed whereon the culprit lay.

'It is well that we have all heard this confession of a crime, black as assassination—a confession which I request you both to commit to memory, and you, John Balderstone, most carefully to writing. As for you, sir,' he added, with a withering glance at Hew, 'I shall never look upon your face again, and now leave you with the doctor and your own conscience, if you have such a thing about you! Order my horse,' he concluded, as he rang the bell, and quitted the room without glancing again at Hew, whose wasted face was buried in the pillows, among which he was groaning heavily.

Buried in deep, anxious, and angry thoughts—angry with himself too—the general rode slowly home.

So—so—this was the secret and true character of Hew Montgomerie—a blackleg—a cheat—the perpetrator of a great

villainy on an innocent man! 'When anything in which we have most believed grows shadowy and unreal, we are apt to grow unreal to ourselves;' and the general, who had once believed greatly in Hew, now knew not what to think.

'Jealousy and avarice are the meanest of passions,' he thought, and terribly had Hew given full swing to both. 'Jealousy, I know, has driven people to incredible acts of deceit; but this act of Hew's has been, beyond all calculations, infamous!'

'It has been just as my heart foreboded!' said Mary to Mrs. Garth, when the revelation reached them; and the measure of her horror of Hew was now full. She then thanked Heaven for her wealth, that she might share it with the bruised and the fallen; but whither was he gone?

Alas! no one could find the smallest clue to that.

After the revelation which fear of death had wrung from him, Hew recovered rapidly, and made many a solemn promise 'to eschew horseflesh and bits of painted pasteboard'; but it was only a case of 'the devil was sick,' etc., for when well he plunged into his old bad courses, far exceeding the allowance the general so generously made to him, and then he disappeared for a time.

Autumn had come now; the crops had been gathered, and the gleaners were busy on the upland slopes and fertile braes of Cunninghame and Kyle; the last of the high-piled wains had gone homeward over the furrowed fields and through the leafy grass lanes that led to the picturesque rickyard; the fern and heath-covered wastes were in all their beauty, the great gorse-bushes in all their golden bloom, and the woodlands wore many a varied hue, from dark-green to russet-brown and pallid yellow.

Since the discovery made by John Balderstone, and the revelations of Hew, the general had been rather a changed and broken-down man; but he now clung to Mary Montgomerie more than ever, and daily she drove him in her pony-carriage —the same in which Cecil was wont to accompany her, wrapped

cosily up in the skins of animals he had shot in India—handling the ribbons so prettily with her gauntleted little hands, and always comporting herself so sweetly and tenderly to him, and just as a favourite daughter would have done.

He felt that a great crime had been committed against one who was his own flesh and blood; and that, in ignorance, he had condoned that crime; and, more than all, in society had visited it with all the acrimony he deemed due and proper to the occasion.

'I have again been guilty of rash judgment—of indiscretion and of cruelty!' he said again and again to himself in secret; and his mind drew painful pictures of the ruined Cecil, a wanderer or outcast, perhaps in penury, misery, and despair, driven, it might be, to suicide; and, remembering the real or fancied vision he had seen in time past, had a nervous and childish fear of perhaps beholding another.

Already had the father been wronged; and now, how much more deeply the son! Was a curse coming upon his race—a curse like that which blighted the Campbells of Glenlyon, and more than one other family, for some crime committed in ages past? It almost seemed so; and he had no language wherewith to express his loathing of Hew, and the cunning and cowardice of the latter.

Tidings of Cecil or how to trace him were the daily thought of all at Eaglescraig, and the general wrote again and again, but vainly, to Leslie Fotheringhame, to Dick Freeport, Acharn, and other members of the corps on the subject; but none could afford the slightest clue to the mystery that enveloped his disappearance.

The presence of friends, if not avoided, was certainly not courted at Eaglescraig now; even the general forgot his reminiscences of India and the Cameronians in this new anxiety, and the days passed slowly, gloomily, and monotonously on, till Mary bethought her of Annabelle Erroll, who she knew had a sorrow of her own, and pressed her to visit them again.

The curiously and mysteriously worded advertisements in-

serted by John Balderstone in the second column of the *Times*, concerning Cecil, and seeking some knowledge of his whereabouts, never reached him by the banks of the Morava, or beyond the slopes of the Balkan mountains; and fears began to gather in the hearts of those who loved him, that if not gone to the Antipodes, he must be dead!

'I am breaking up, John,' the general would say querulously to his old friend, 'and am about as much use now as a Scotch M.P. or a third wheel to a field-piece!'

Yet, as we are all creatures of habit, he adhered to his old ways mechanically. As an Indian veteran, accustomed to be up at gun-fire and when the cantonment ghurries clanged, he was always wont to be abroad early; and there was one morning, which he never forgot, when he was up and about earlier than usual.

He had been through the stables with Pate Pastern, the groom, and seen the carriage-horses, his own roadster, Mary's pad and her ponies; he had been with old Dibble, the gardener, about potting the flowers, though he scarcely knew a daffodil from a rhododendron; had seen the shepherd off to look after the cattle, and now came the postman with the letters and papers; but he tossed them all aside and muttered:

'What can interest me now?'

But Mary always had the power of rousing and interesting him, and, breakfast over, she began to read the morning paper aloud, as she often did, for he loved to hear her silvery voice. She turned, as was her wont with him, to the Indian news, though many a hearty laugh he had at her haphazard pronunciation of Hindostanee names and words; and, after giving him all the news from Simla, Calcutta, and so forth, her eyes fell on those from the Danubian provinces and the East; and she was in the act of reading, when her voice broke; as a swelling came into her throat she stopped, and, while tightly clutching her paper, fell back in her chair, with her face deadly pale.

'Mary, my darling, you are ill; what is the matter?' ex-

claimed Sir Piers, starting from his easy-chair and ringing the bell furiously.

'News of Cecil!' she replied faintly.

'News of Cecil—when—how?'

'See, see! oh, heavens!' she exclaimed, smoothing out the paper and then pushing back her hair from her temples.

It was the special correspondent's detailed account of the battle by the Morava, and the singular gallantry of 'the British volunteer, Mr. Cecil Falconer,' in rescuing and remounting General Tchernaieff, after a brigade of Cossacks had given way; of his promotion and decoration with the Takovo cross, and all that the reader already knows.

Tremulously the general read the notice again and again, with a glow of pride and joy in his old face—joy in which Mary did not fully share, for dread of the perils surrounding the absent one was her immediate second thought; but all suspense—all uncertainty were ended now. The absent, the wronged, and the lost one was discovered, but oh, how far away!

'My boy's boy! my boy's boy!' muttered Sir Piers, wiping his spectacles, which had become covered with moisture. 'Tunley, call Mrs. Garth—the chief of my household staff—she must hear of this at once. Quick, she is in the compound!' he added, referring to the garden, as an Anglo-Indian never rids himself of his old associations. And motherly old Mrs. Garth, who was looking just as we saw her last, with her grey hair thick and soft, and with keen bright eyes under a pair of shrewd Scotch eyebrows, heard with genuine joy the sudden tidings of Cecil, for whom she had always had the strongest regard.

The day was passed in surmises and plans for the future, and Mary hurried away to her own room, to find perfect seclusion at last—away from all! She locked her door; threw off her dress as if it stifled her; donned her robe de toilette; let down the masses of her hair for coolness, threw them over her shoulders, and sat down with her dimpled chin resting in the

pinky palm of her left hand, to think—think—think it all out.

What should she do? Write!

She threw open her desk and blotting-pad; but her brain was too excited—her poor heart beat too fast and too painfully to permit her to steady her thoughts, and she paced to and fro, so wearily.

'Thank heaven, dear Annabelle is coming!' she exclaimed more than once.

This battle by the Morava had been fought, by the date given, more than a month ago. A whole month! What might not have happened since then? In what fresh perils might not Cecil have been plunged? And much *had* happened, such as the gentle mind of Mary could not have conceived, or deemed possible, in this age of the world.

Now the news of the Servian war—a war to her hitherto unknown or devoid of interest—became suddenly invested with a new and terrible importance.

The regiment, of course, heard betimes of Cecil's exploit and the honours awarded him; and, as may readily be supposed, the mess had quite an ovation in consequence.

For certain cogent reasons of his own, Hew Montgomerie heard the tidings with unmixed satisfaction.

'In Servia—fighting in Servia, of all places in the world!' he muttered; 'if he only gets knocked on the head, I may find my old place at Eaglescraig again! But he may escape and come safely home. Why should I not go to Servia, and mar his future in some fashion?' he added, as a dark and cruel expression stole into his shifty eyes; 'but how to get there—and where the devil *is* Servia?'

Hew's ideas on geography were decidedly vague, and even Bradshaw failed to show how he could get there; but, intent on his diabolical thoughts nevertheless, he continued to think and to mutter:

'Fighting, is he! A bullet may rid me of him—rid me all the sooner that, no doubt, he sets little store upon his life now.

Anyway, I should like it soon to be settled whether I am to have Eaglescraig after all!'

And he began to consider intently how he could reach Servia before Cecil could hear of his changed fortune; in what capacity he could act when there; what was the language spoken; where was the money to come from with which he was to travel? And for some days he resolved himself into a species of committee of ways and means, combined with many dark, cruel and malignant thoughts.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE COINCIDENCE.

On her way to Eaglescraig, Annabelle Erroll proceeded by way of Glasgow, and had barely taken her seat in the compartment of a first-class railway carriage, when a gentleman entered, and took his place at an opposite corner. Then the train glided out of the station; smoky Tradeston on the right, and the dense masses of the ancient Gorbals on the left, were quickly far behind, and the view on either side became more open, as it sped on its way; and ere long Annabelle forgot all about her companion, in watching the estuary of the Clyde, the rock of Dumbarton, the mighty blue mass of Ben Lomond, and the glorious panorama of the hills of Argyle.

Her companion had leisurely opened a courier bag, and taken therefrom various serials, without offering one to her, as she sat with averted face intent on the scenery. He seemed one of those composed travellers who can hear unmoved the scream and whistle of any number of engines; the startling shout of 'Change here!' as the train pulled up at some confusing junction, from where travellers branched off in all directions—some the right, but many the wrong; and where leisurely and indolent porters spent the stirring yet monotonous day in cramming passengers and portmanteaus into carriages, to get rid of them

as fast as possible for the next batch of portmanteaus and passengers, without caring whither they went or what became of them.

He could see, by furtive glances over the top of his paper, that his companion was a tall and elegant girl, faultlessly attired in a rich sealskin, with gold ornaments; with feet and hands which—when the latter left her tiny muff—were well-shaped and small. There was a haughty grace in the carriage of her handsome head; she wore a smart hat, and a thick black veil tied over her face effectually concealed her features. He took in all this at a glance as he settled himself to his newspaper, while she scarcely dared to breathe as in him she had now recognised Leslie Fotheringhame!

Where was he going—what was he doing here, in 'mufti' too? The calm, high-bred face, to which the dark eyebrows and thick, black, heavy moustache imparted so much character—the face that was ever dwelling in her memory was before her again. In repose, she thought it seemed older than it should have been, or was wont to be; and when eventually he did venture to address her, when he smiled, it grew young and bright again, like the face she remembered in the pleasant time beside the Tay, and the last season at Edinburgh.

She saw that he had still at his watch-chain a tiny gold locket, which she remembered well; for it had been her gift to him, and contained a microscopic likeness of herself on one side, and a lock of her golden hair on the other—or *had* done so, when she saw it last.

Did it contain them now, or had they given place to memorials of—of that other woman—a hateful and humiliating thought!

How she longed for an excuse or opportunity to get into another carriage, or for other passengers to come in, ere he recognised her; but the train was an express one, and no addition could be made to their number for some time to come.

Secure, as yet, behind the mask of her veil, she watched him, while her heart beat with lightning-speed, and swelled with unavailing regret. Intent, apparently on his paper, he had not

recognised her. He had, of course, ceased to care for her, she thought, when he had learned to love that other one; and so now, her coming and her going, her joy and her sorrow, were nothing to him—were less than the snow of last winter.

Yet she was woman enough to love him now, when breathing the same atmosphere with him—seated within a yard of him—to love him, in these the days of his biting indifference, even as she had done in those when a smile of hers could bring him so winningly to her side.

'What a fool I am!' she thought; 'oh, I hate myself! Would that I were a man—they can so easily forget!'

At that moment one of her bracelets became unclasped and fell at his feet.

He picked it up, and not sorry, perhaps, for an excuse to address her, said simply: 'Permit me?' and clasped it round her white and shapely wrist.

'Thanks,' she replied as briefly; but her voice, though low, instantly stirred a chord in his heart; the memory of her figure rushed upon him; he gazed keenly at the fair face half hidden by its veil of lace.

'Annabelle—Miss Erroll!' said he, in a strange voice, while lifting his hat, and half offering a hand: a motion which she ignored, and felt herself grow pallid in being discovered at last—pallid with something of anger too, for, with all her natural sweetness, Annabelle had a heart of pride.

'We are old friends,' said he, with some confusion or emotion of manner; 'at least we can be that?'

'Not even that, I fear,' said she, with affected firmness; and then added a little irrelevantly: 'would that I had never come here; an express train, too—how provoking!'

'Is my company so hateful—or are we to be enemies now?'

'As you please,' she replied, with growing irritation, for, her secret sentiments apart, the sudden situation exasperated her, after all that had occurred. 'To meet you here was, at least, the last thing I could have expected.'

'Or wished?'

'I have no reason for not replying in the affirmative—yes.'

He sighed, and for a moment looked out of the window at the past-flying landscape, across which the white cloud of the engine smoke was whirling. After a pause, he asked in a tone of assumed indifference:

'Are you going far by this train?'

'Far or near cannot possibly interest you, Captain Fotheringhame; but I may mention that I am going to Eaglescraig in Cunninghame.'

'Eaglescraig!' he exclaimed, forgetting his pretended calmness of manner.

'And you?' she inquired, for she had a tender interest in him, in spite of herself.

'I am going there too,' he replied, with the slightest twinkle of mischief in his handsome eyes.

'By invitation?' asked Annabelle, aghast, conceiving that her friend Mary had formed some scheme concerning them.

'No; I have volunteered a visit to the general, out of my friendship for Cecil Falconer—or Montgomerie, we must call him now. I have seen several notices concerning him in the public prints; I know all about his changed fortunes, and I want to be of service, if I can, to him and the old general. Thus I took this train, by a singular coincidence.'

'One I would have avoided, could I have known, foreseen, what was thereby involved.'

'Do not say so, I implore you,' said he.

She made no response to this; but sat with her face resolutely turned to the carriage window, while biting her cherry nether lip, and with difficulty restraining tears of vexation behind her veil; while Fotheringhame, as he looked at her, thought just then that no woman could compare with her—not even Mary Montgomerie—in his eyes; and he longed to see her face unveiled, but dared not, in her present mood, venture to hint of such a wish.

As his presence seemed to give her such extreme annoyance, he felt half inclined to relinquish his plan of visiting Sir Piers;

but then he had written to the latter, announcing his intention of coming, and had obtained two or three days' leave for that special purpose.

The recent tidings of Cecil in the public prints—the brilliant exploit he had performed in the war in Servia—'in Servia, of all places in the world,' as Fotheringhame said—fortunately gave this luckless pair of travellers a kind of neutral ground on which to meet—a neutral subject on which to converse, apart from themselves; but in no instance can a man and a woman who have ever been *more* to each other than friends meet, after parting under any circumstances, without having emotion of a deeper kind—be it love, or be it hate—than ordinary individuals. Thus, ever and anon the conversation of these two manifested a decided tendency to take a personal and explanatory turn; yet they sat rigidly apart, each in a corner of the carriage.

'Poor Cecil!' said Fotheringhame; 'he may have tired of treading life's dull road ere the report of his good fortune reaches him—the heir of an old baronetcy and an estate.'

'With the affection of a dear girl like Mary Montgomerie too!'

'True,' added Fotheringhame, with much sadness of tone; 'she does not forget, as some so readily can, what Motherwell calls "the love of life's young day."'

Thinking that, if not acting, this remark conveyed a taunt, Annabelle said:

'You seem somewhat changed in way and manner since we saw each other last.'

'If so, I have had good reason therefor.'

'You were once gay enough, and happy too.'

'Happy when you made me so; but Heaven knows, Annabelle,' he exclaimed, with sudden emotion, 'that gaiety and pleasure have long been strangers to me.'

'So duplicity brings about its own punishment,' she replied pointedly and pitilessly.

'Duplicity?' said he, looking up with a surprise that seemed

at least genuine; 'I do not understand—you slighted my visits —returned my letters——'

'Good reason had I to do so. I had hoped we might avoid this subject——'

'Reason?' he queried, as her voice broke.

'Remember your mysterious friend,' said Annabelle bitterly; 'she was *not* Blanche Gordon; so who was she—what was she? But I despise myself for asking!'

'She was then what she is no longer now—an unhappy creature,' was the enigmatical reply, from which Annabelle, whose pride revolted from making further inquiries, drew all kinds of singular deductions.

And now, at this crisis in their conversation, the train stopped, and as an influx took place of those fresh passengers so longed for by Annabelle a short time before, it could not be resumed in any form, and the rest of the journey was performed by them in silence, or nearly so.

CHAPTER XLIII.

EAGLESCRAIG ONCE MORE.

MARY, in the general's snug and well-appointed old family carriage, with a stately hammer-cloth and heraldically bedecked panels, awaited Annabelle at the railway station; and though expecting Leslie Fotheringhame at the same time, and quite prepared to welcome him warmly as Cecil's friend and whilom brother officer, and though not surprised to see him arrive, she was certainly surprised to find that he and Annabelle had come *together*, and clapped her little ungloved hands merrily, as she received them, in a childlike way that almost provoked the latter, who was a proud and rather reserved girl.

She coloured deeply and with positive vexation, even under the eye of her dearest friend, for thus arriving at the same time, by the same train, and in the same carriage, with Leslie Fother-

inghame; and this emotion made her more shy, more resentful to him apparently, and more resolved to keep as much as possible aloof from him.

And he, piqued by this, of which he was speedily conscious, conceived a vague and direful jealousy of some person as yet unknown, and it coloured his manner accordingly.

For the first time, on this occasion, he saw fully the soft fair face of Annabelle, as she raised her veil, and her velvet-like lips met those of Mary. Would they ever touch his again?

The weather was duly discussed, and the advent of Snarley gave them something to talk of, as that much-petted cur was nestling cosily under the skin of a man-eater that would have gobbled him up at a mouthful; and he now welcomed both with much yelping and effusiveness.

Mary felt the situation of her friends to be an awkward one, and exerted herself to make both feel at ease, as they drove under the evening sunshine to Eaglescraig, where both were welcomed by Sir Piers in the grand old dining-hall, the oak panels of which were nearly hidden by ancestral portraits, and from the tall windows of which there was a noble view of mountain and coppice, of rocky cliffs and the far-stretching Firth of the dark blue Clyde; and at the elbow of the host stood old Tunley, with a silver salver of decanters and glasses.

'Too late for tiffin and too early for dinner, Fotheringhame,' said the general; 'just a nip to keep the cold out, and then the dressing-bell will ring, and Tunley will see that you are attended to.'

Tunley, like most of the old servants, many of whom had been born on the estate, had but one creed—the welfare of the family of Eaglescraig. Their sorrow had been sincere when 'Master Piers came to evil,' with his father; and it had been renewed now by the strange story of Cecil, which had, of course, taken a powerful hold of their fancies; thus he and they all viewed the advent of Fotheringhame with the deepest interest, believing that he was in some mysterious way to restore the

wanderer to his home, and was, indeed, but the forerunner of that event.

One word more about Tunley. The poor man felt ashamed of one feature in his past blameless life, and daily intercourse with the general and Mrs. Garth made him feel it keenly; for this most respectable of British butlers had never served, even for an hour, in the Cameronians, and this he deemed somewhat of a blot upon his scutcheon.

'Mrs. Captain Garth, of course, you remember,' said the general to Fotheringhame (who was imbibing a liqueur glass of mountain-dew), indicating the old lady, who was seated in an easy-chair, holding a hand-screen to shield her face from the glow of the fire; 'widow of my old friend Garth of Ours—and now, I think, we all know each other.'

Sir Piers had some vague idea that there had been a flirtation—a lovers' quarrel, or some such folly—between Leslie Fotheringhame and Annabelle Erroll; but that was nothing to the old man—they would square it, no doubt, if they were so disposed. And he thought only of making welcome his guest—a Cameronian too!—friend of his grandson, who had been so horribly used; and as for Annabelle, Mary would look after her.

Dinner duly came, and passed with the usual commonplace conversation; the presence of the servants precluding all from talking freely, and conversing on the matter nearest their hearts—the volunteer in Servia. But Fotheringhame, from his place by Mary's side, had but one thought—how surpassing fair looked Annabelle! Her dress was a plain and simple muslin one; a blue flower of some kind was amid the masses of her golden hair, and the brother of it nestled amid the soft lace in the swell of her bosom.

After the ladies had returned to the drawing-room, the object which had brought him to Eaglescraig seemed half forgotten for a time, and his thoughts had followed her; but now the hospitable general was pushing the decanters to and fro; Tunley had withdrawn; and anon Fotheringhame roused himself, for

he was full of joyous enthusiasm at distinction won by his friend in a foreign service, though he cordially wished that he had never been driven to seek it there—a service in which he had been driven by desperation to seek a new home; and Fotheringhame quite won the heart of the general, who now—in all that Cecil had done and achieved—was assured that he saw but the reflection and reproduction of his own character, vaguely known as 'a chip of the old block,' and that it was from *him* that Cecil inherited all this fire and spirit. He became quite jovial, and ere the evening was over began to sing, in a very quavering treble, snatches of 'the old Subadahr.'

'At the mess, we knew not what to think of his disappearance,' said Fotheringhame, playing with his walnuts; 'some hinted of California and the Rocky Mountains, others of Ballarat, the Diamond Fields of Natal, the Cape War and the Zulus, and everywhere else that the desperate and the broken——'

'The desperate and the broken!' sighed the general, setting down an untasted glass.

'Yes, Sir Piers—go to mend their fortunes, to seek excitement, oblivion, and too often to end their lives; but certainly no man among us ever thought of Servia!'

'It was most kind of you to volunteer this visit, Fotheringhame, to assist me with your advice and knowledge of a European world that is somewhat new to me now,' said Sir Piers, grasping his hand.

'Not at all, Sir Piers; I would do anything to serve Cecil. I thought two heads might be better than one; I am younger and more active than you——'

'But, egad, I have seen the day!'

'And so, I thought, we must talk the matter over at leisure, yet without delay.'

'All right—the decanters stand with you. And now, Fotheringhame, you are aware of how he was a victim of a vile scheme—how his wine was drugged by a scoundrel whose attested confession I possess?'

Aware of how deep had once been the general's interest in Mr. Hew Caddish Montgomerie, Fotheringhame merely bowed an assent; and, after a few minutes' silence, inquired where he was now?

'None know, and none care,' replied the general hotly; 'he has disappeared altogether—let us hope for ever. But if life lasts me, by the Heaven that hears me, I shall set the honour of my boy right and clear before the regiment, the Horse Guards and the world, or lay my commission at the foot of the throne!'

'In an affair of jealousy——'

'Jealousy!' exclaimed the general, with a fierce grimace; 'we settled these, and other affairs, differently in my time, before the service went to the dogs. Egad! I knew a fellow, when I was a sub at Vellore, who was shot for declining to dine at a certain mess-table. Did you ever hear the story?'

'No, general!'

'Well, you see, it happened in this way,' began Sir Piers, who, having obtained an audience, fell back at once into his old Indian train of thought. 'We were cantonned at Nussirabad, in the wild black province of Ajmir, with the 76th Bengal Native Infantry, when there came from England, to join that corps, a Captain Evelyn, a quiet and gentlemanly young fellow, whom all liked, save some of the 76th, who, sooth to say, were nearly all fiery rackety Irishmen, and by no means good examples of the Emerald Isle; for cards, brandy-pawnee, and incessant uproar were the order of the day, and of the night too, in every bungalow in their lines, generally finishing at a very late hour by breaking each other's heads with the billiard-cues, and shying the balls out of the windows; while they were born-devils at pig-sticking, horse-racing, and not a pretty ayah was safe within ten coss of them. Such were the officers of the *Moriartie-ka-Pultan*, for the corps had been raised by an Irishman, and bore his name.

'Evelyn declined to join their mess, not on that account, but because he wished to live economically, being engaged to a young lady who was coming up country, chaperoned by Mrs.

Erroll, the mother of Mary's friend, then a young and lovely matron—a mere girl in fact, and travelling *dawk*, as we all did in those days; and with the utmost politeness he explained all this to the president of the mess committee. That personage, a certain Captain Darby O'Dowd, swore that this was a distinct affront to the whole corps, and that Evelyn must be paraded about gunfire. The mess consisted of sixteen, and as he could not fight them all, they leisurely cast lots, and the task fell to O'Dowd, who challenged Evelyn, with the intimation that if he —the valiant Darby—fell, the next in seniority would take his place.

'Evelyn was too high-spirited to decline this outrageous challenge, and they met at gunfire, in the open plain, while the sun was as yet below the hills of Ajmir. I remember it all as if it were yesterday, for I had the mainguard.

'Evelyn, thinking, no doubt, of the girl who was far away, and whom he might never see again, standing with his second, worthy John Garth of Ours, pale and sad, yet resolute in aspect, on one hand; on the other, O'Dowd, with his second, a Captain O'Spudd, and all the mess of the 76th, anxious to have their turn in the shooting, grouped close by, and pale and bloated enough they looked in the cold, half light of the unrisen sun as it stole across the plain, and all shaky enough with their over-night potations.

'"Having no personal injury to redress, gentlemen, I decline to fire," exclaimed Evelyn, in a loud, firm voice.

'"Plaze yourself, me boy," replied the relentless O'Dowd as he fired; and, shot through the heart, poor Evelyn fell dead on his face!

'Even in those days there was a devil of a row about this remarkable duel, and it was a close shave with O'Dowd escaping being hung for it; but a verdict of "Not guilty" was returned, and he was killed soon after in action by a grape-shot; and O'Spudd died of a sunstroke in the jungle, and was buried there in his blanket.'

The general followed up this by many other stories, all more

or less bloodthirsty, till his guest became somewhat silent—
—bored by them, no doubt; and then he said:

'Fotheringhame, the sherry stands with you—just "a white-washer," and then we shall join the ladies.'

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE DIVIDED PAIR.

MRS. GARTH was dozing dreamily before the fire, and the two girls were at the piano, when the general and Fotheringhame entered the drawing-room.

They were idling over the instrument, before which Annabelle was seated, and over the keys of which Mary was occasionally running her fingers, as if apparently to conceal a little confidential conversation that was in progress between them.

'You'll have a turn with the guns to-morrow, Fotheringhame,' said the general, 'but you must excuse my absence; my day is past for that sort of thing. The rocketers I once could bring down, pass over my head contemptuously now; and bullfinches seem much bigger in the hunting-field than they used to be, so I funk them entirely, and seek a quiet gate, as I don't like to come a spread eagle into the field; and, by Jove! the doctor has already hinted about a respirator. D——n! fancy a fellow at the head of a brigade with a respirator! I was nearly drowned the other day, and would have been but for Mary, when landing a twenty-pound pike from Eaglescraig Loch; so it is time I gave over these little vanities, and left them to my juniors and successors; though, Heaven knows, that if I was anxious about my estate in this world just when it is time to be thinking of the other, it was not for myself, but for those who are to come after me,' added the general in a softened tone, for now much of the peppery nature of the old stock-comedy guardian had left him. 'Fond of music, Fotheringhame?' he asked, after a pause.

'Very.'

'Ah; dare say we shall find you something in that way. Mary is no bad performer.'

'Pray excuse me—to-night,' urged Mary.

'Then I won't excuse Annabelle,' said the general, patting the shoulder of the latter, while Fotheringhame drew near; 'do favour us with the little song I have so often heard you sing with such extreme sweetness and pathos.'

'Which, Sir Piers?'

'What is it? oh yes—"Love me always, love me ever," or something of that kind. There must be some tender association connected with it, I am sure,' continued Sir Piers, in utter ignorance of how his remarks cut two ways, like a double-edged sword.

'I have not the music—and—and I have quite forgotten the words,' replied Annabelle, growing painfully pale, and wishing that the floor would open and swallow her up, conscious that Leslie Fotheringhame was standing at her back. The latter saw the ill-concealed emotion that pervaded her whole frame, and he felt keenly for her.

'Is this girl to be, for good or for evil, my destiny after all?' he thought, as he regarded with his old admiration the beauty of her refined face and her brilliant complexion—that dazzling and wonderful fairness which almost invariably accompanies the possession of golden and auburn hair.

Annabelle did not leave the piano; it afforded her a pretext for keeping her face turned from those around her, and, impelled by some new emotion, she sang in succession some of her gayest and most effective songs, while Fotheringhame hovered near, leaving to Mary the task of turning the music, and steadily and keenly he regarded the singer. Was this gaiety real, or was she acting a part? he thought; and seeing that he came nearer, Mary withdrew.

'You regard me with surprise,' said Annabelle, finding his eyes fixed on her, and feeling a desperate necessity for saying something. Indeed, they had scarcely spoken since leaving the railway carriage.

'Certainly, I am surprised,' said he; 'I did not expect to be standing by your side thus, and hearing your voice again.'

Full fell the light of the chandelier on the lovely upturned eyes that did not soften in the least, as he hoped they would do, at his slight allusion to the past.

'Captain Fotheringhame,' said Annabelle, quite calmly, and in an ordinary tone, 'you look at me as though I were somehow changed.'

'Oh, you are not in the least changed,' he replied, in a low voice, and with a bitter smile; 'you are volatile and—cruel as ever.'

'Cruel!' she repeated, under cover of a musical crash, while the colour rushed to her cheeks and delicate neck; but she disdained to say more, and thus, to one or two half-broken utterances of his, finding that she made no response, Fotheringhame drew back and rejoined the general.

How long was all this to go on? was Annabelle's bitter thought. In the old time, by the silver birches on the Tayside, they had met, loved, quarrelled, and parted, she thought, for ever; but to meet and quarrel again with just cause on one side, with the prayer in her heart that they might never look in each other's faces again, and here they were now, by an unexpected coincidence, a strange freak of destiny, under the same roof, and in the same room, compelled to meet at least as mutual friends!

Thus, when they parted for the night, his voice was as calm and his smile and bow as coldly polite as her own. Then he and the general withdrew to the smoking-room to talk over Cecil's affairs, and scheme out some plan for his future, and the girls gladly sought their rooms, which adjoined each other, and plunged at once into gossip and hair-dressing.

For weeks and weeks past Mary's life had been one of dull routine; she had fed her pet birds, her pigeons, watched her flowers, and watered her ferns, as usual; it was *such* a relief to do, or be doing, anything: but now that Annabelle Erroll had

come, she felt almost happy in her companionship—for both had enough to talk about.

'Have you met as acquaintances merely?' asked Mary, with eagerness.

'Yes: but acquaintances of a peculiar kind, certainly. How could it be otherwise, after all that has passed between us? I must studiously ignore the past,' continued Annabelle; 'nor shall his strange and sharp allusion to it move me, save in the way of annoyance and surprise.'

To her it seemed very strange and unaccountable that Leslie Fotheringhame should adopt an indignant tone with her, as if *he* were the wronged party, and that she had nothing to complain of in reference to his conduct with the unknown lady.

'Why did he so studiously, so cruelly deceive me?' she exclaimed, on the verge of tears; 'but that I inherit the spirit of my father, the old colonel, he would have broken my heart—I loved him so!'

'Poor Annabelle!' said Mary, caressing her; 'twice engaged, and twice separated—you are a curious pair. Let us hope that the third time may prove successful and irrevocable!'

'Never!' exclaimed Annabelle. 'Did he not openly tell me that she—that woman—is happy now? What did he mean by that?—for there was something of mournful exultation in his tone!'

'It is all very strange,' said Mary, in perplexity; 'can there have been some simple, yet perhaps inexplicable, mistake at the bottom of this unhappy business?'

'No, Mary—I tell you no!' replied Annabelle, with angry energy; 'the woman in the matter was a fact palpable enough. And what can the unexplained mystery of his interest in her be? and is it not to him degradation, and to me insult?'

'Unexplained: it might not have been.'

'How?'

'You forget the rejected correspondence—the last unopened letter.'

'Anyway,' replied Annabelle, with a forced laugh, 'unlike

the Grande Duchesse, I shall no longer dote upon the military. I'll look out for an easy-going parson, or plain country gentleman, and, as Hawley Smart says, "more weddings take place from pique than the world wotteth of," and Hawley is right.' Then, dropping this tone, she twined her white arms round her friend, and, gazing into her soft face, said, 'Dear Mary, how poorly you are looking!'

'Well, have I not had much cause for anxiety, and tears too, think you?'

'No man, I believe now, is worth the grief that robs a woman of her peace and rest.'

'Oh, Annabelle, the thought of Leslie Fotheringhame embitters you; but I sorrow for Cecil—and there are men and men, remember. How strange it seems that now I must think and speak of him not as Falconer (his mother's name), but as Cecil Montgomerie!' she added, with a soft smile, gazing on vacancy.

'I thought,' said Annabelle, after a pause, 'that I should have died when dear old Sir Piers so awkwardly asked me to sing that stupid song to-night—died of shame and mortification! Surely no woman has ever been more thoroughly humbled than I! How unfortunate all this is!' she added, almost weeping with vexation; 'mamma knew of our engagement, and that he is my cousin. She knows how shamefully he treated me after the night of that most unlucky ball; and all about that—that person—the woman with the golden-hazel eyes; and how shall I be able to convince her, proud, resentful, and justly-suspicious as she is, that our meeting here is a miserable coincidence—a circumstance beyond my control?'

'It looks like Fate, my dear Belle.'

'Fate? How can you romance so after all that has happened?'

'What happened may be a mistake—a coincidence, too—explainable perhaps, though I have not much hope of that. If dear Cecil were but home, he might clear it all up for us. Home! when will that be? Soon, I hope—oh, so soon!' she added, as she kissed her friend and sought her pillow.

Annabelle lay far into the night awake, revolving endless schemes and conversations in her busy little head. She naturally longed to be gone from Eaglescraig, and nothing but a sure knowledge that Fotheringhame's leave was for a very brief period, pacified her at all. That they should be in the same house, and meeting perpetually at the same table, was intensely awkward under the circumstances of their changed position.

Annabelle felt this keenly, and thus she sedulously avoided Leslie Fotheringhame, who felt conscious that she did so, and misconstrued it either into an aversion for himself, or a regard for some other man—a regard inspired, perhaps, by pique, or wounded self-esteem.

CHAPTER XLV.

A STRANGE ACCUSATION.

MEANWHILE how fared it with Cecil, and what was now his fate?

He had permitted the cold, damp earth to be heaped upon him, only moving sufficiently—unseen in the gloom of the night and of the hole wherein he lay—to keep his body, though partially buried, from being so entirely; fortunately, the would-be assassins were satisfied that they had effectually concealed him from the troops, who were certainly in motion close by, and then retired for a time, intending, as they stated, to return shortly, and make sure of their prey.

The moment they were gone, though scarcely daring to breathe, and oblivious of many a sore and bruise, of which he became conscious hours after, Cecil rose, clambered out of the hollow, shook his clothes as free as possible of the soil that had covered him, secured his pistols in his belt anew, and on looking to his sword, thanked heaven that, in his fall, the steel scabbard had saved the blade from injury.

Drawing a long breath, a sigh of relief, he prepared for immediate flight, though giddy, bruised, and weak. Lights were

flitting to and fro in the farmhouse close by, and he could actually hear the voices of Guebhard and his Montenegrins, so not a moment was to be lost in retiring. Even the farmer and his people were to be sedulously avoided, and though Cecil did think of his horse, it was chiefly with reference to the impossibility of recovering it.

A sound made him shrink behind a bush, and then he saw one of his late assailants creeping towards the hole, softly, slowly, stealthily, on his hands and knees, with a yataghan in his teeth, and his eyes, turned more than once towards the house from which he had stolen on deadly intent, to anticipate his leader and companions, by finishing off their victim if any life remained in him, and obtaining the valuable diamond ring of Palenka, the despatches and other plunder.

A moment he paused in his progress, irresolutely, for the voice of a cuckoo, roused by the recent noise, was now heard in a tree close by; and the Black Mountaineer, affrighted by an idea of the *vila*, which often assumes, as the Servians also believe, the form of that bird, let the yataghan fall from his mouth.

Ere he could pick it up, Cecil, whose blood was now at fever-heat, passed his sword twice furiously through the body of the wretch, with his foot spurned it headlong into the hole (where, to the bewilderment of Guebhard and his ruffians, it was found some time after), and then, animated by a species of despairing energy, he hurried, breathless and panting, stumbling heavily at every step, into the thick wood that lay near, intent only on immediate escape and concealment for a time—at least till day broke, and he could look about him; nor did he pause in his flight until he felt assured that some miles lay between him and his enemies.

A great weariness, the result of long and over exertion of mind and body, came over him; and on finding a dry and sheltered place, under the branches of a great laurel bush or tree, he fell fast asleep, fearless of the wild hogs, of which vast numbers feed in the woods.

When he awoke, stiff and benumbed, a silvery mist was rising from the dark green foliage of the forest, and above the mist was the blue sky and the clear bright morning sunshine, as he began to search for a path, which he hoped might lead him to a highway, though such he knew, in Servia, were only to be found in the neighbourhood of towns.

The sound of a cavalry trumpet at no great distance caught his ear. It gave him a species of electric shock, and he remembered, that to the fears expressed by Guebhard of troops being in the vicinity, he no doubt owed his life. He pressed eagerly, anxiously forward in the direction whence the sound had come, the rabbits scuttling briskly out of his way, as he hurried along a narrow track; and at length he was rewarded by reaching a regular beaten road, on which was a long string of horses and mules laden with provisions, forage, and stores, proceeding under an escort of Russian Lancers from Belgrade to the front—direct to Tchernaieff's headquarters, as the officer in command—a *capitan*—informed him.

The latter, a handsome man, kid-gloved and glazed booted, wore a very dashing uniform; a green tunic, piped with scarlet, faced with black velvet and laced with gold, and on his breast glittered the medals he had won in the expeditions to Khiva and elsewhere, with the orders of St. Andrew and St. Vladimir.

Cecil made his position, his wants, and his recent troubles known in French, which the Ruski spoke fluently. The latter summoned a sergeant, who procured a horse and some food—*i.e.*, biscuits and brandy—for Cecil; and now his heart grew lighter as he rode on and felt himself in perfect safety, but not the less intent on having public or private vengeance upon Captain Mattei Guebhard.

He saw once more the Morava, and after a few hours' riding, was thankful when the escort passed the outposts of the Russo-Servian army at Deligrad, and he could proceed without delay to the quarters of General Tchernaieff.

Inspired more than he had ever been since he came to Servia by the sights and sounds around him—the tents, the

huts, the batteries of artillery with their limbers all drawn up wheel to wheel; the cavalry, their horses picketed in close ranks or at exercise upon the plateau; the strains of a magnificent Russian band playing the 'Blue Danube,' and then the 'Manolo'—he ceased to think or question himself, like Mr. Mallock, 'Is life worth living?' He was too young yet to find that there was nothing in it. Since that bright summer day when Warren Hastings, 'then just seven years of age,' as we are told, 'lay on the bank of a rivulet, which flows through the old domain of his house to join the Isis,' and registered a vow that he would, one day, be lord of Daylesford, how many vows of anticipated honours, wealth and greatness have been registered, that may never have been fulfilled!

But some such emotion—some such hope of a brilliant future, swelled up in the heart of Cecil, as he dismounted from his horse at the door of an edifice, two sentinels before which, and the Russian flag flying thereon, indicated it to be the head-quarters of General Tchernaieff.

Officers and orderlies belonging to every arm of the service, horse, foot, artillery, engineers, hospitals and ambulances, were passing in and out, when Cecil sent in his name to the general, who had just come from vespers in the little iron church, which had been sent to him by the ladies of Moscow, and in which he had been depositing two or three standards recently taken from the Turks, prior to their transmission to the Emperor at St. Petersburg.

Cecil's jaded aspect, his tattered uniform, soiled, sodden, and of no particular colour now, for the brown of the tunic and the scarlet of the facings and braid were all of one dingy hue, attracted some attention among the gorgeous, and almost fantastic, costumes of the Russian staff and cavalry officers in the ante-room, through which he was quickly ushered into the presence of Tchernaieff.

The latter, who wore a short, brown shell-jacket, with a rolling collar laced with gold, and crimson overalls, was smoking a huge pipe and seated at a table littered with papers and printed

journals, from which he started up as Cecil entered, and drawing himself up to the full height of his short pudgy figure, while all his short, stubby hair seemed to bristle, and his wiry moustaches to stick out like those of a cat, he eyed him with considerable sternness, indignation, and surprise, mingled in a face that was never at any time a very handsome one.

Count Palenka, who was writing at the table, laid down his pen and eyed Cecil with cold hauteur, even hostility, and did not accord him the vestige of a recognition.

'What on earth can be in the wind now?' thought the latter, as his late bright hopes vanished into thin smoke. Mechanically he took the despatches from his sabretache, and said respectfully:

'I have the honour to deliver to your excellency these documents, entrusted to me by his Majesty the King.'

'His Majesty the King does not owe you many thanks for the haste you have made!' replied Tchernaieff, as he somewhat rudely snatched the papers from Cecil's hand, while his eyes literally glared at him.

'I do not understand this bearing of yours, general,' said he haughtily.

'You may understand, however, Herr Lieutenant, that you loitered for many days idly at Palenka.'

'A dislocated arm—dislocated when fording the Morava—detained me there.'

'A likely story, truly,' said Tchernaieff, with growing indignation; 'why ford a river that has bridges, and why the devil ford it at all, before coming to the town of Tjuprija?'

'I lost the direct road and fell into the river in the night. The family of the Count——'

'Knew not that they were harbouring a traitor,' said Palenka grimly.

'A traitor, Herr Count!' exclaimed Cecil.

'I have said it; so don't repeat my words.'

'There must be some strange misconception in all this,' replied Cecil, more bewildered than indignant, perhaps; 'the way was beset——'

'By Captain Mattei Guebhard,' interrupted Tchernaieff.

'You know it!'

'From his own lips. He is now in camp, and very properly and duly reported to me that he had done so; but that you escaped him, he knows not how, after killing one of his men, and causing, by misadventure, the death of another.'

Cecil was more and more bewildered by the strange candour of Guebhard in acknowledging the outrageous conduct of which he had been guilty; but the injurious treatment now so unexpectedly accorded him, after all he had undergone, filled him with just anger and indignation.

'Who dares to accuse me of wrong, or even of error?' he demanded.

'That you will discover in time.'

'Of what am I accused?' he continued.

'That also you will learn in time; and in time you may see the mines of Siberia, if you escape death! Meanwhile you will withdraw, and remain under close arrest. Count Palenka, take his sword.'

'The officer of the nearest guard can do that. Your excellency must hold me excused,' was the haughty and contemptuous reply of Palenka; and a few minutes afterwards Cecil found himself disarmed and a prisoner under close arrest, with special sentries guarding the door of the house, in an apartment of which he was left to his own bitter and confused thoughts.

That he was the victim of some strange and malevolent report made by Guebhard to the general and Count Palenka, he could not doubt; but of what nature could that slander be? Palenka had called him a 'traitor.' He could only be so to King Milano Obrenovitch, and he felt certain that no act of his own could draw such an epithet upon him, so to Guebhard now did the whole tide of his fury turn.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A FATAL PROOF FOUND.

Food and wine were placed before him; he recoiled from the former, but drank the latter like one who had been long athirst.

After all he had undergone, and all he had done, to preserve and deliver in safety these unlucky despatches, this, then, was the grim and degrading welcome that awaited him in the camp of the allied Servian and Russian armies!

What did it all mean? Some dreadful mistake, or a false and malicious accusation, which time must soon unravel. Meanwhile, how difficult it was to be patient or calm under the circumstances; and he asked himself again and again, would Fortune never be tired of persecuting him?

Would he ever forget, he had thought, that *mauvais quart d'heure* in the place that so nearly became his grave? and now he was in peril as great again.

'A traitor,' had been the epithet applied by Count Palenka towards him. In what way could he ever be so? Was he to be made the victim—the scapegoat of some dark political game, between the Servian prince he served, and the general of the Russian army? 'You may see Siberia yet, if you escape death,' had been the menace of the latter, who actually owed his life at his—Cecil's—hands. He recalled the words, and knowing all of which these men were capable, and all they had the power to do, with all his natural courage, could not but feel appalled.

The room to which he had been consigned was on the upper floor of a house in the little town of Deligrad. It had little other furniture than a wooden divan, that ran round it, and whereon were spread the bear and wolf skins on which he could seat himself, or repose at night.

Its windows were little more than narrow slits, and through them he could see the camp, spreading over the low-lying emi-

nences which bound, on the east, the valley of the Morava—the long streets of tents and huts, and little *tentes-d'abri*, the smoke of the fires at which the soldiers cooked their food; and the Servian tricolour flying on a huge earthen redoubt, formed on the summit of the most commanding height, and armed with heavy guns, pointed grimly towards the point from which the Turks might be expected to approach.

Amid these streets of tents, drums were beaten and bugles sounded all day long; orderlies spurred their horses to and fro, and Servian peasants drove waggons drawn by white bullocks, or led long lines of laden ponies, and itinerant sutlers and vendors of grapes and apples, sardines, tomatoes and tobacco, etc., went incessantly about, together with itinerant fiddlers and bagpipers.

Beyond all this, he could see the road winding away to Belgrade, near two long, low, whitewashed edifices, the abodes of suffering and death. On each a white flag with a red cross was displayed to indicate that they were hospitals, on which no shot or shell must fall, even if the infidels succeeded in storming the heights of Djunis, which overhang the other side of the Morava.

Daily Cecil watched all this from his windows, till his soul sickened at it all and of inaction, after the fierce excitement of recent events; but after a week had elapsed, the clash of arms, as the two sentinels at the door accorded a salute to some visitors, followed by the clatter of spurs and steel scabbards on the wooden staircase of the house, preceded the entrance into Cecil's room of an officer in the uniform of the Servian staff, the provost-marshal and a gentleman in civilian costume, who announced himself as the deputy minister of police from Belgrade, and who was attended by a subordinate in a kind of uniform.

'Police?' replied Cecil, in an inquiring tone; 'it is, then, some civil—error that I am accused of?'

'No error at all, Herr Lieutenant! but of a crime against the State,' replied the civilian — a black-bearded man, with the

ribbon of the Takovo cross at his lapelle—in a somewhat gruff manner. 'Information has been lodged with the authorities that you have, or have borne about you, papers of a treasonable nature.'

'Lodged, by whom?'

'Captain Mattei Guebhard.'

Cecil laughed, but angrily, nevertheless.

'Herr Lieutenant,' said the provost-marshal, a grim-looking old sabreur, 'you may find this a hanging, and not a laughing, matter!'

'Thus,' continued the deputy minister of police, 'we have orders to examine your person for secret papers, if, by the delay foolishly accorded to you, they have not been destroyed.'

'Papers—what papers?'

'That, as yet, can only be known to yourself.'

On this his attendant made a pace towards Cecil, who haughtily motioned him by his hand to pause, ere he laid a hand upon him.

'You delivered the despatches of General Tchernaieff to the King at Belgrade?' resumed the police official.

'To the King—yes.'

'Don't repeat my words, please!'

'Mein Herr?'

'I say, don't repeat my words!' exclaimed the other, who manifested rather a disposition to bully. 'You tarried unnecessarily at the castle of Palenka?'

'I met with an accident, of which the general is, I presume, fully aware, though the count seems somewhat dissatisfied,' said Cecil, in whom this questioning excited surprise and indignation, rather than alarm.

'There you met Captain Guebhard?'

'To my sorrow, and no small disgust, I did.'

'And though unable, as you averred, to proceed, you refused to give him the documents; but conveyed them in a contrary direction from the camp, with what purpose is best known to yourself; and but for the circumstance of your meeting an

escort of Servian troops, the general would never have received them at all?'

'This statement is false in its tenor,' replied Cecil haughtily; 'and I am utterly in the dark as to your inferences.'

'Ah—indeed! Permit me to examine your sabretache.'

'It is empty.'

'We shall see,' replied the official, as he unbuckled the accoutrement so named, and which was suspended by three slings from the waistbelt. 'What have we here?' he added, as he drew from an inner pocket, which Cecil never knew it possessed, a small parchment document, and uttered a genuine cry of astonishment; 'here is enough to hang a battalion!' he added. 'Herr Lieutenant, here we find you in open communication with the Pretender, Kara Georgevitch!'

'Who the deuce is he?' asked Cecil, with equally genuine surprise.

'Do not pretend ignorance, and thus add to the crime for which you will be so severely punished, that I am actually sorry for you,' replied the deputy minister of police, regarding Cecil with great sternness, nevertheless. 'Here is your commission as colonel—bearing your own name—to raise a regiment of Montenegrin deserters, for the service of Kara Georgevitch—the exile—the outlaw—the Pretender to the Servian throne, to whom, no doubt, you intended to convey alike the King's despatches and the general's plan of the campaign!'

'Impossible—you are under some delusion,' said Cecil, with anger now.

'I need scarcely ask you to look upon what you know already exists,' replied the other, with some indignation, and then holding the document before the eyes of Cecil, who saw plainly and undoubtedly that it was all he stated it to be, and his name written there as 'Cecil Falconer,' and that, among other signatures, that of Kara Georgevitch was appended to it.

So completely was he bewildered by this strange circumstance, that he permitted the document to be taken away before he had further examined it; and while a drawn sword was

placed against his heart, the pockets of his uniform, and even the lining thereof, were roughly examined for other treasonable papers, after which his visitors retired, and he was left—astounded—to his own reflections.

He was the victim of a deep-laid scheme by Guebhard. He saw it all, and in his suppressed passion could scarcely breathe—yes, he saw it all now; but how to prove it? Failing to abstract or obtain by fair means the despatches at Palenka, for the information of this Kara Georgevitch, with whom the fact of having this—probably blank—commission proved him to be in communication—he had beset the way, and finding that Cecil baffled him, had now brought this false accusation against him.

He remembered the warning of Margarita, and that he had detected Guebhard meddling with his sabretache. Could he doubt, now, that he had intended to abstract the despatches on one hand, while concealing in it this perilous and already prepared document on the other?

It was not until a day or two more had elapsed that Cecil understood his peril fully or what the involvement meant, and that there were two claimants to the Servian throne—Milano Obrenovitch the successful one, now reigning, and Kara Georgevitch, a pretender. It was a position exactly the same as if some one in Scotland, in the days of 'the Forty-Five,' had been found with a commission to raise a regiment of Highlanders for 'King James VIII.;' and thus Cecil found himself, as yet, in a predicament of no ordinary magnitude, in which those for the prosecution would have it all their own way, and the defence, conducted by himself, must seem weak indeed.

Again and again, Pelham, Stanley, and one or two other kind-hearted Englishmen, who, in search of a 'new sensation,' were taking a turn of service against the Turks, endeavoured to visit him, and to take some measures for his safety; but all were bluntly refused access to the prison in which he lay, for so closely was the house guarded, that it became a prison in reality now.

He lost heart—his spirits began to sink under the rigid

confinement to which he was subject, and his doubt and anxiety as to the future issue of the whole affair. He had about him a confused and dazed feeling, such as he had not possessed since he had been in the castle of Edinburgh, and the time of the fatal ball; and as the hours passed by him in solitude, and the detested details of his room—the pattern of the paper on its walls, the divan that bordered them, the skins that lay thereon, the cracks in the ceiling and the bare planking of the floor—seemed to become photographed on his brain, and the senseless jingle of silly airs, the words of absurd rhymes, recurred to him again and again with that provoking but persistent reiteration so common to all—at least to many—when their minds are tortured by doubt or calamity.

Seated there in that prison room, hearing the sounds of the adjacent camp by day, and by night only the measured tread of the Russian sentinels without, as they trod silently and monotonously to and fro on their posts, Cecil—looking back through the receding vista of the past, and the latter and most bitter portion of his career in which Mary Montgomerie bore a part, was often on the point of asking himself whether it was not a dream rather than a reality, that brief and happy reminiscence of their love; and whether it did not pertain to a life in past ages and under some different phase of existence. In short, his thoughts, under the high-pressure put upon him, became rather wild and incoherent at times.

CHAPTER XLVII.

CECIL'S VISITOR.

FROM the monotony of his moody and irritating reflections he was roused one day by the entrance of a visitor, and he started on finding himself face to face with Margarita Palenka, who had come to the camp on horseback, escorted by old Theodore, the veteran of Sadowa. Her eyes were full of unshed tears,

as she gave Cecil her hand, and it was impossible for him to behold this beautiful girl's sympathy unmoved.

'How can I ever thank you,' said he, 'for all this deep and kindly interest in me—almost a stranger?'

'I fear the worst, from what my brother says,' she replied in a low and husky voice.

'The worst—death?'

'Better that than—Siberia!'

'So say I,' was Cecil's grim response; and then he added hotly: 'I am a British subject; how dare they menace me with such a fate?'

'A British subject once—a Servian soldier now,' said she gravely.

Cecil thought of the old Cameronians, and his heart seemed to swell painfully, while he eyed with some contempt the brown sleeve of his Servian tunic.

Margarita had come to Deligrad, we have said, on horseback; thus a brown riding-habit—almost claret-coloured in tint, out of compliment to the Servian uniform, and like it faced with scarlet and laced with gold—set off her magnificent bust and figure generally. A smart hat encircled by a white ostrich feather, with white riding gauntlets, made up a costume that was altogether very effective, and became the brilliant and striking character of her beauty.

At her left breast she wore the bright ribbon of St. Catherine of Russia, procured for her by Tchernaieff, and given to ladies of rank alone.

'Think not ill of me for this visit,' said she after a pause, and when he led her to a seat on the divan; 'I have come to comfort you, when none other dare attempt it—to save you if I can, and none other dare attempt that either, or is perhaps inclined to do so.'

She felt the peculiarity, the delicacy of her position; and Cecil felt it too, with a rush of gratitude in his heart—all the greater, no doubt, that she was so beautiful in person, and winning in manner.

Intensely interested as she had found herself to be in the fortunes and safety of a young stranger; knowing the wiles and the vengeance of which he was assuredly the victim, and all that he had to apprehend in the present and in the future, sleep had almost deserted the eyes of Margarita for some nights past, and thus their lids were inflamed and her face looked wan. For hours, without retiring to bed, she had been wont to sit musing by the windows of her room, watching the stars as they shone above the dark woods of Palenka, and listening to the distant roar of the Morava, till inaction became torture, and she made up her mind to ride to Deligrad, to discover the truth of all the alarming stories that had reached her and the old countess, and also what she could do to serve—if possible to save—him.

Hence her most unexpected visit to Cecil.

'When you warned me to beware of Mattei Guebhard,' said he, 'I could little imagine, or anticipate, all he can be capable of.'

'And I little thought, when we parted at Palenka, to see you again,' said she, with something pathetic in her voice; 'and less than all, under such circumstances as the present.'

'But you do not believe—you cannot believe——'

'About the commission? No—of course not: the idea of your being colonel of a regiment of such wretches as the Black Mountaineers is too absurd! Savages whose tastes for strong waters, the property of their neighbours, and the noses, ears, and even the skulls of their enemies, are proverbial,' she added with a shudder. 'Besides, I understand that you never even heard of Kara Georgevitch?'

'Never before. I knew not there was such a person in existence.'

'How singular! I have met him often at Vienna; danced with him at the palace on the west side of Innerstadt, and know that he—admired me very much,' she added, with a little smile.

'His commission had my name in it, my accusers assert.'

'I do not yet understand the mystery of that—though how it came into your possession is plain enough to me.'

'And to be accused of killing a couple of Montenegrins——'

'Who would have killed you if they could! The concealed paper was a *dernier ressort*, in case you escaped them. Oh, it is all so like the subtle and elaborate villainy of Mattei!'

'And how absurd is the accusation that I meant to carry away the King's despatches for the service of Kara Georgevitch or the Turks, when I risked life to defend them!'

'Time will unravel all this—meantime, I shall watch over you, if I can,' said she, almost tenderly, holding out her hand to him ungloved, with a pretty yet imperious air, as if to show its whiteness and beauty, for she was a coquette to the tips of her fingers.

He touched it very lightly, but instead of retaining it, as she doubtless expected, drew back—as if to avoid temptation, she seemed to think, for she said haughtily:

'You forget yourself, sir, or me!'

'Would that I could do so!' said Cecil.

The gentleness of his tone, the sadness and bewilderment of his air, touched her; she took his hand deliberately in both hers, and kissing him on the forehead with warm and throbbing lips, said:

'My brother's preserver and my brother's friend! I repeat that I have come to serve you and save you, if I may—to see you and comfort you at least, in a land where you are so utterly friendless.'

Her voice broke a little.

'By whose permission did you reach me?' asked Cecil hastily, and apparently oblivious of her emotion.

'That of Tchernaieff—he could not refuse me.'

'Who that looked upon your face could refuse you anything!' he exclaimed, more in a spirit of gallantry than anything else.

'I detest compliments; so seek not to flatter me.'

'Nay flattery exists not in paying praise due to beauty or merit, but in praise misplaced.'

After a pause, Cecil said with a smile:

'Surely you never, at any time, loved this man Mattei Guebhard?'

'I never did so,' said she, emphatically; 'but, I once said before, I could not help him loving me. I have never loved anyone; and moreover I shall never—marry!'

Now Cecil had known and seen enough of the world to be aware that when a handsome young woman declares her intention of never marrying, it becomes one of the broadest hints a man can receive; and, under all the circumstances, he heard her now with a perplexity that bordered on irritation.

At such a time cold reason might suggest that Mary Montgomerie, and his country too, were lost to him for ever! In Servia was his new home; Margarita was beautiful, anxious to serve him and to win his gratitude—too evidently his love, if she could. Just rage at Guebhard invited him to meet her half-way; but the image of Mary came before Cecil, and he thought:

'Montrose was right in his song—"Love one, and love no more!"'

He was perfectly conscious that some time or other, at Palenka, he *had* spoken of love to Margarita; but was then referring to his love of Mary Montgomerie; while she had believed that he was in some curious way pleading his own cause with herself.

There was even now a struggle going on in the heart of Margarita, between her mind and her affections; and though eventually it seemed as if the latter would conquer, some sense of propriety, of what society and training inculcated, and the moral force of her own spirit, did battle against them; and then, moreover, she was not without some dread of her brother the Count of Palenka.

Despite all this, and her recent coquettish announcement that she could never love, and would never marry any man, Cecil found her coming to the point with him and taking the initiative, piqued perhaps that he was the only man she had

never yet subdued; and so, before he knew very well how it had all come to pass, or by what she had prefaced it, he was startled by her saying in her most dulcet Servian:

'So you think, dear Cecil, I could make your life a happy one?'

She asked this softly, yet a little imperiously, while flicking the skirt of her riding-habit impatiently with her switch, and with downcast looks, as Cecil paused in perplexity, thinking, 'What had he said to draw this forth?'

'Surely I am not so uncivilised; I don't ever paint and powder, like all the English girls I saw at Vienna!' she added.

'But,' said poor Cecil, who thought he had perils enough to encounter, without thus being 'run to earth,' and having this perplexity added to them, by an impulsive girl, who probably had something Hungarian and Italian in her blood, inherited from the old heyduc; 'but they don't all wear paint and powder—and one girl I knew at home certainly did not do so.'

This was, to say the least of it, an unfortunate speech.

'One,' said Margarita, with a flash in her eyes; 'who was she?'

'One of whom you remind me—at times,' he replied, thinking to compliment her by saying that which was simply untrue.

'*Who* was she—who *is* she—one you cared for?'

'Not as I care for you,' replied Cecil unwisely, yet truthfully enough; 'but long ago—ah, how long ago it seems—she passed out of my life, and I out of hers.'

'She is dead, then?'

'Yes—to me.'

'To the world, you mean—so she is in a convent, then?' said Margarita, readily adopting the idea suggested by herself.

'You have no need to be jealous of her,' said Cecil.

'Nor am I,' replied Margarita proudly, and still switching her riding-skirt.

'Was she like me, as you say?'

'Handsome, with perfect features—*mignonne* face, and——'

'Enough—let us talk of ourselves now,' said Margarita softly, and then Cecil found himself adopted and placed—

he feared—on the footing of an accepted lover, without having attempted to play the character, in any way.

What might be the result, if this too evident regard for him turned to hatred under his coolness? He remembered the well-known couplet in Congreve's 'Mourning Bride,' and became filled with positive apprehension, if it be true that there is 'no fury like a woman scorned.'

Platonism was evidently a *rôle* she did not understand; and when any suspicion of his doubts or hesitation occurred to her, her full proud lips curled, her dark eyes flashed, and a flush crossed her cheek. But how was he to indulge in love-making—and still more in affecting such, environed by perils as he was then?

It was but too evident that Margarita, like most coquettes, had fallen a victim to herself at last, and was actually pining for a man who had never spoken to her more than words of the merest friendship and thanks; and but for the memory of Mary, and a sentiment of chivalry that mingled with his love for her, Cecil, under all the circumstances of his position, might have yielded to the temptation that beset him, and at all hazards have become the lover of this Servian girl, whose wild impulses came to her with the mixed blood of more than one fiery race; and who, hence, could not be judged of by the same standard as an English girl of the same position.

At last she rose to retire.

'I cannot conceal from you, that, from all I hear, your peril is very great,' said she, nervously attempting to button her riding gauntlets, a task which Cecil hastened to perform for her.

'I shall demand a court-martial!' he exclaimed.

'Palenka tells me that such will not be accorded to you.'

'What then?'

'By the fiat of the King, through the minister of police, you may be—will be—I cannot speak it,' she continued in a broken voice, as her tears fell fast, and her head drooped for a moment on his shoulder; 'rather let me aid you to escape, and fly this place for ever. Have you money?'

'None.'

'That shall be my care—and horses too, by which to reach the frontier of Bulgaria, about fifty miles from this, where you will be comparatively safe. But how to get you out of this place—and how to elude these Russian sentinels at the door, are the difficulties that appal and bewilder me!'

'Margarita, the idea of flight is most repugnant to me—it looks so like timidity and confession of guilt.'

'They are determined to deem you guilty, I fear, under any circumstances. You have but yourself to consider, and—me.'

'But without a guide——'

'Fear not for that—I shall provide you with a guide too,' she replied with a bright and tender smile; and so ended this strange interview, which, for a little time at least, had served to lure him from his troubles, yet had added to his perplexity; for he felt that if Margarita saved him from impending peril—and that she would do so at all hazard he never doubted——that circumstance would load him with a debt of gratitude which the devotion of his future life could—in her estimation—alone repay.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

BAFFLED!

THERE could be no doubt that Cecil had interested Margarita tenderly and deeply. She had studied him closely; she was acute, and had gathered, from much he had mentioned incidentally at Palenka, that he had been unfortunate already in life, young though he was, and that he had 'a history,' as Mary Montgomerie and Annabelle Erroll had surmised before.

She guessed that his boyhood and youth had not been quite happy, and this, more from his reserve concerning them than from confessions made. She gathered, too, that over his early years no father's love or protection had been thrown; that he had no brother or sister, but had possessed a mother on whose memory he doted, and at the mention of whose name she saw

the expression of his eyes soften, and heard at times his voice grow tremulous; and she loved him all the more for the little halo of mystery that seemed to surround him.

And she had remarked, with pain, how the rich gloss had left his dark brown hair, and that there were haggard lines about his eyes and mouth; and that much of the soldierly *débonnaire* frankness and manner in his bearing was gone now.

Empowered by the possession of Tchernaieff's signed permission 'for the bearer to visit the prisoner,' and encouraged by the absence of her brother Palenka at the headquarters of General Dochtouroff, she came again at noon to make final arrangements for his escape and flight.

'But how to get out of Deligrad?' said he, after their first greetings were over; and here we may mention that, literally, *grad* means a fortress in that part of the world.

'That will be my task,' replied Margarita.

'But to fly, like a coward, or a criminal!'

'I wish you could fly like a bird,' said she, playfully. 'Heed not scruples—what scruples have these people with you? There is no shame in such a flight. Believe me, Cecil, I do not speak unadvisedly. If you would be a living man—at the least an unfettered prisoner, being taken you know not whither,' she continued, in a voice that suddenly broke, 'you must be out of Deligrad to-morrow night. Let us not waste time. Listen and obey me; I will find the occasion, the means, the guide, a sure means of escape, if you will but avail yourself of them.'

Did she mean to accompany him in his flight? He half feared so, not knowing how far the wild impulses of this fair continental might carry her; but he was not left long in doubt.

'Once clear of Deligrad and the advanced posts,' said she, 'you will proceed by Banga and Nissa, but that town must be avoided, as it is fortified with ramparts, palisades, and closely-watched gates; then by Mustapha-pacha or Glana; but that being a fortress, must be avoided too; and once beyond Stolo, oh, Cecil, we shall be safe!'

'*We!*'

'I must accompany you to ensure your safety; it is only some fifty miles; and if my share in your flight is discovered, as it is sure to be, what will be my fate? Then Bulgaria or cold Britain must be my abiding-place, after all.'

'*Nous verrons*,' was the dubious response of Cecil, as he took her hand in his, and her eyes drooped. 'And your plan?' he asked, with an ill-repressed smile.

'Ottilie—you remember Ottilie; she is a tall girl; and will come hither about dusk, armed with a pass, and wearing the cap and capote of a Russian officer. Clad in this costume, you take her place and pass out; she will give you the parole, when I get it.'

'Leaving her here?'

'Yes.'

'And what will be her punishment?'

'Palenka will save her, I have not the slightest doubt.'

'Could he not then save me? Is there no other plan?'

'Listen to me,' she continued impetuously. 'To give each of the sentinels a cup of drugged vodka would be easy enough, and doubtless they would drink them to the last drop. I have seen such things done on the stage at the theatre in Vienna, and read of such things again and again in romances; but they would be discovered asleep on their post, ere you were clear of this—so the disguise is the most perfect plan, and the darkness will favour it.'

As they spoke their hands were fondly linked for a time—his, in a spirit of purest gratitude; hers, passionately—there was no concealing that!

'You will give the parole,' she continued, in a low voice, 'and pass on to the group of cottages lying yonder in the hollow on the right of the camp, and there old Theodore will be waiting with horses when the evening gun is fired. No more; you know all, and now I must be gone.'

'Farewell, Margarita; to me you are a protecting angel—yet, ere you go——' he bent down and kissed her, as her face fell on his neck.

'Regard me as a sister,' she faltered; and in a moment more he was alone, with a confused sense of not having exhibited sufficient gratitude or regard for one who was risking so much for him.

After she was gone the hours passed slowly, while Cecil remained sunk in thoughts that were far from being pleasant.

Times there were when he felt sullenly and doggedly resigned to the inevitable, whatever it might be—to await what fate had in store for him. His essay in a new country, a new service and field, for laudable ambition, had proved a miserable and total failure, and life seemed to have no prize for him now that was worth consideration.

Other times there were when a fierce gust of impatience and indignation possessed him, and he paced his room like a caged lion—impatience of coercion and just indignation at the severe treatment to which he was subjected, the unjust suspicion under which he lay, and the dangers which menaced him at the hands of the ignorant, prejudiced, and uninquiring officials at whose mercy he found himself.

Thus he fell the more readily into Margarita's scheme of seeking safety in flight, and so ending all connection between himself and the Servian army.

'Death or Siberia—death or Siberia! What manner of death?' he would ask of himself; 'a soldier's, surely!'

He felt sometimes, in his over-tension of thought, that peculiar emotion which many must have experienced—as though he was not himself, but had two separate identities; and that the old self was far away from that prison room, before the windows of which the two Russian sentinels seemed to tread for ever to and fro, with their bayonets glittering within arm's length of him.

Were misfortune and he to go for ever hand in hand? He deemed that already he had offered up hostages, bitterly, to evil destiny, when he was thrust out of his beloved regiment, when he lost Mary, and was cast, nameless, on the world; and lo! the hand of fate was on him again, and more heavily than ever.

And ever and anon a gust of rage at Guebhard shook his breast, with a longing for just vengeance upon him. Guebhard was evidently one of those strange and pernicious creatures who crop up at rare times in all phases of society, and have existed in all ages of mankind—one of a miserable band of men who, according to an essayist, resemble the lowest animals of creation, and are far more pitiless when their hate or hunger are raised. 'They are as crafty as they are cruel; they watch, wait, and see whom they can destroy, and outrage every feeling dear to the majority of mankind; and to call such men brutes is to throw scorn upon creatures who may be considered superior to them in every way.'

Such a man was Mattei Guebhard!

Cecil could punish him, certainly, by carrying off Margarita, and taking her for ever beyond his reach; but how was he—Cecil—a fugitive in Bulgaria, without a ducat in his pocket, to subsist there, and with a beautiful girl on his hands, unless he offered his sword and his services to Osman Pasha, whose army was ere long to advance upon Plevna?

Anything—any risk—he thought, was better than utter inaction. The suspense of his position was intolerable; and it would be easier, he imagined, when the worst had come, whatever it was, when it was faced, and all was over for ever!

So the day passed slowly on towards evening; the sounds in the busy and crowded camp began to lessen and nearly die away; sunset drew near, and the inlying pickets were beginning to fall in with greatcoats and knapsacks, and Cecil looked from time to time towards the group of white-walled cottages, shadowed by dark cypresses, in the hollow near the camp, where even now, perhaps, old Theodore awaited him with the horses, and his heart leaped when suddenly the evening-gun boomed from the earthen rampart on the summit of the position, and the Servian tricolour came fluttering down the staff as it was struck for the night.

Steps sounded on the wooden stairs, and a personage entered, clad in Russian uniform, ushered by the sergeant of

the guard. The moment the latter withdrew, Ottilie, for it was she, divested herself of a false beard and moustache of grizzled hair, and it seemed strange to see suddenly the smooth and handsome face, the dark laughing eyes and pouting lips of the pretty Servian girl.

She wore the deep peak of a flat Russian forage-cap well down over her face, which was also further hidden by the high fur-collar of a long regimental grey capote, which reached nearly to the ground, and in them she proceeded at once to invest Cecil, saying that Theodore awaited him at the appointed place.

Obedient to the will of her mistress, Ottilie, poor girl, seemed to have none of her own, and had no fear for herself save in disobeying the orders of Margarita.

Cecil, even now, lingered in adopting the costume she brought him—lingered with mingled repugnance and rage at having to adopt such a *rôle*. Then came an emotion of disgust at a service which forced such a *rôle* upon him, mingled with a longing for the freedom proffered, and so close at hand. Already, in fancy, he seemed to be in the open air—the free breezy atmosphere, at liberty, and in the saddle, galloping on and on towards the Bulgarian frontier; already he seemed to feel the horse under him; to be inhaling the perfume of night, the fragrance of the pine-forests by the broad-flowing Morava; but then he thought of the girl whom he was to leave in his place, and his heart died within him!

She covered her face with her hands, and, while she wept bitterly, exclaimed, in broken accents:

'Oh, Herr Lieutenant, I have destroyed you! I have forgotten the pass-word!'

'Perhaps it is as well,' said he, with stern composure; 'but don't weep, my brave girl, and, hush! cloak yourself again, some one is coming.'

Steps, voices, and lights, were all on the creaking stairs without, and the guard on the house were now under arms in front of it. Who were coming? What had caused an alarm? Had the plot of Margarita been discovered?

'Quick, disguise yourself and begone—you have not a moment to lose,' exclaimed Cecil, compelling Ottilie to resume her costume and prepare to withdraw; and it seemed to him that while life lasted, if for thirty years, as it might do now only for thirty minutes, he would never forget the memory of those voices and steps on the staircase, or the glare of light that streamed under the door across the bare floor of his room.

The idea of resistance, mad and desperate, of shooting down the first man who entered (for Ottilie had given him pistols), occurred to Cecil; but only to be relinquished, as he thought of the poor girl whom he might involve in ruin if he shed blood; and, throwing the weapons to the other end of the apartment, he drew himself proudly up to await whatever fate had in store for him now; and he did not doubt that it was terribly close and finally arranged, when, among the group who entered, he recognised his former grim visitors, the deputy minister of police, and the provost-marshal of the camp!

CHAPTER XLIX.

CROSS PURPOSES.

'GOOD-MORNING, Fotheringhame,' said Sir Piers, as his guest entered the breakfast-room betimes, in shooting-costume, and ready for the preserves; 'I trust that Eaglescraig air and Eaglescraig claret and whisky brought you pleasant dreams.'

'There are other and better adjuncts here to suggest pleasant dreams,' replied Fotheringhame, as his eye rested for a moment on the two young ladies, and he gave his hand to Mrs. Garth, after which an animated discussion about sport ensued between him and the general, while Mary and Annabelle idled over their letters.

Leslie Fotheringhame was one of those kind of men of whom little is usually seen when staying in a country house; thus, short though his visit was to be, and important the object which brought it about, all the day subsequent to his arrival he was

beating the covers and after the partridges, with old Sandy Swanshot the keeper.

Was Annabelle disappointed in this? we are forced to admit that she was piqued by it, however.

Like many social monomaniacs, Mrs. Garth considered herself an able tactician, and thought to set matters right between these sundered twain; but in this instance she failed signally, especially with Annabelle; there seemed something mysterious in the quarrel, their relation to each other, and their mutual sentiments, which the old lady could not fathom.

Annabelle was very bitter on the subject.

'His presence here is an insult to me, Mary,' said she, after watching him cross the lawn, and disappear with the keeper and the dogs; 'and every time his eyes meet mine, they seem to be examining me, as if to learn how I bear his defection.'

'If I can read eyes aright, they wear a very different expression, Annabelle,' said Mary; 'but his presence here with you is indeed a singular coincidence.'

'After what happened in Perthshire, Mary, I made myself too cheap in Edinburgh, when we met again; and truth to tell you, darling, though I cannot hate—but love him still,' she continued, with her eyes flashing through unshed tears; 'I must hate myself for doing so—and despise myself for my infatuation. That my regard should be too lightly, too easily won, and re-won, by one who valued it not! But, if his majesty thinks he has but to throw the handkerchief, he is mightily mistaken,' she added haughtily.

'To me it seemed as if his eyes wore almost an imploring look as he bade his adieu to you and left the breakfast table,' urged Mary, in her gentle manner; but though the idea was pleasant and soothing to Annabelle's angry pride, she replied that she felt only astonishment and indignation at his *hardiesse* in looking at, or addressing her at all.

'Am I to be a fool like the fair Elaine, who wasted all her life in caring for one man? But then there are no Sir Launcelots of the Lake now.'

Yet Annabelle, while sedulously schooling her heart to be indifferent, felt to the full, as far as Leslie Fotheringhame was concerned, how, mind and manner apart, 'one human being is felt to be more attractive for mere bodily reasons than all the rest of the world besides.'

Though a little provoked that he had gone forth to shoot, and waste, as she deemed it, a precious day in the coverts, Mary was grateful to Fotheringhame for the object which brought him to Eaglescraig—his interest in Cecil Falconer—or Montgomerie, as she had taught herself to call him now.

In her mind he was every way associated with the days when life became to her an Eden—when loverlike she discovered that secresy and silence were sweet to cultivate; when the garden, the woods and fields, the moon, the stars, the sky, had all new charms, beauty, and brightness they had never possessed before, and her intercourse with Cecil became a system of emblems, metaphors, parables, whispers, and pressures of the hand.

How far away that delicious period of her life seemed now; and he—where was he? In a land to her less than half known, wholly barbarous, and where he was hourly menaced by a violent death.

'How large your ring seems for you now?' said Annabelle, as she toyed with Mary's hand.

'How much smaller my finger has become since Cecil placed it there!' replied Mary, turning the diamond engagement hoop wistfully; 'I am so afraid of losing it, that I wear mamma's wedding-ring as a guard—many have done that.'

Fotheringhame returned late from the coverts, and long after the keeper had brought in his bag.

'Did you lose your way?' asked Mary.

'No, Miss Montgomerie; but I lost a locket from my chain—a locket that I would not lose for any sum of money.'

'And you found it, I hope?'

'Yes—here it is—but after a long hunt among the gorse and brake.'

'Is it so valuable, then?'

'To me it is.'

'May I ask what it contains?' asked Mary, laughingly, as she saw it dangling from his watch-chain.

'Well—a lock of hair—and——'

'What more?' she continued, archly.

'If you insist on knowing, the likeness of my—future wife,' said he in a whisper, yet not so low but that it reached the ears of the startled Annabelle; and Mary was so shocked, so pained and full of pity for her, that she grew very pale indeed, and questioned him no more, and he laughingly retired to dress for dinner.

'So—so,' thought Annabelle; 'the locket I gave him actually contains the portrait of a woman—doubtless, she of the hazel eyes!'

Fotheringhame felt that he loved, or had loved, this proud girl earnestly and deeply; and that she, with equal earnestness and depth, resented something on his part which had, perhaps, driven her to loving some one else; thus the new emotion of jealousy was infused in his mind, imparting a constraint to his manner, while Annabelle felt that she had been merely the plaything of his idle hours. Thus each shut up their real feelings; and to a greater extent than either knew, they were at cross purposes.

Annabelle thought that she had overheard and discovered enough to cure her even of regret, and to steel her heart and make her seem what she wished to be, studiedly calm and indifferent to all appearance; but this resolution was rather severely tested when after dinner, instead of joining Sir Piers in the smoking-room, Fotheringhame came lounging deliberately out to the terrace before the house, where she was lingering alone, with a Shetland shawl thrown over her head, and when he joined her, and—as she thought with singular coolness and effrontery—made some commonplace remarks upon the warmth and beauty of the autumnal evening, to which she assented coldly and briefly.

'Chance has thrown us together again—a chance for which I had ceased to hope,' said he, in a low and earnest voice; 'and Annabelle—if you will once more permit me to call you so—I would wish to talk with you calmly and dispassionately over that estrangement which has been a source of great bewilderment and the keenest sorrow to me.'

She was amazed at his hardihood; but said, quietly and gently, while keeping her face averted, as he continued to walk by her side:

'If you are disposed to take a philosophical view of what has certainly crushed my pride—if I ever had any—and sorely wounded my self-esteem—nay more, has caused, I am willing to own, a great pang to my heart—so am I, Captain Fotheringhame. Our acquaintance, to call it by its least name, has been a most unfortunate one; so, if we talk at all, perhaps we may find another subject.'

And she continued to look straight before her, with her face half averted, and thankful that she had a veil—at least the Shetland screen—to conceal the proud and passionate tears that welled up in her blue and handsome eyes.

Meanwhile Mary, remembering Fotheringhame's awkward revelation so recently, was watching the pair with more anxiety than hope or exultation, and was perhaps a little surprised to see them gradually quit the terrace and descend to the shrubbery walk in the garden below.

'When will our consultation about Cecil begin!' she thought, a little petulantly and impatiently. 'If a separation from one we love, though short, is hard to bear, what must such as mine from Cecil be?'

He might die in that distant land—how dreadful to consider such a contingency!—and in dying, never know of the good fortune that awaited him at home, of who his family were, and the bright hope that now smiled upon his love for her!

Meanwhile those she had been watching were now in a sequestered walk.

'You have suffered, Annabelle,' said Fotheringhame, in an

agitated voice, as he turned and confronted her; 'I can read it in your face.'

'If I have suffered, sir, it has been through you.'

'Oh, say not so,' he exclaimed in a prayerful way.

'Sir—your manner—your mode of conduct, bewilder me!' she exclaimed, as she was about to sweep away, when he strove to take her hand, but she withdrew it sharply and defiantly.

'Annabelle!' he said reproachfully.

'How dare you—how can you be so persistently cruel?' she cried haughtily, while cresting up her head. There were no tears in her eyes or voice now.

'Cruel, Annabelle?'

There was the old charm in his voice, and she could not resist it.

'Why was that letter—my last to you—returned to me unopened?'

'Because, Captain Fotheringhame, I thought it right to do so.'

She was gazing at him now steadily and defiantly.

'Had you read that letter it would have explained all.'

'Who the mysterious "*F.F.*" is, or was.'

'Yes,' said he sadly, with a peculiar inflection of voice.

'Enough of this,' said Annabelle, haughtily; 'I leave you and all your interests to the—the lady whose likeness is in your valued locket.'

'You do? If I have been guilty of aught, in your eyes, you will certainly forgive me when you look upon her face.'

'Your intended! permit me to pass, Captain Fotheringhame—surely I have been subjected to mockery and insult enough to satisfy even you!'

With tender and observant eyes, Leslie Fotheringhame was watching her soft features, and saw them all quiver over, as if with a sudden pang, and his heart was moved, for a lovely face was hers. With much of reverential tenderness he detached the locket from his chain, opened it, and then Annabelle beheld a likeness of herself—simply a fine coloured photo, forgotten by her, but evidently treasured by him.

Annabelle was startled on seeing this, but not disconcerted.

'And so, sir,' said she, 'while loving another woman, you have in mockery, and perhaps for the amusement of your mess-room friends, dared to carry my likeness about with you!'

She spoke firmly, and with difficulty restrained a passionate fit of tears—of wild weeping, in fact.

'I never loved another woman—or anyone but you, and you alone, Annabelle, as I can swear to you with truth,' said he, earnestly and tenderly.

'And who, then, was the woman whose initials were the same as your own, or nearly so, with whom you had mysterious meetings—correspondence, and all that appeared to be part and parcel of a deep and concerted intrigue? But it is beneath me now to inquire!' she added bitterly.

'Annabelle, the returned letter would have told you all—my sister.'

'Your sister!' repeated Annabelle, in a breathless voice, and with some incredulity of manner.

'My only sister Fanny—the runaway wife of a husband who is now in India, and to pay whose debts I sold my troop in the Lancers. You have surely heard of your cousin Fanny Fleming. She had no friend in the world but me. I thought to conceal her existence from you and others; but you have wrung the secret from me. A false wife—a helpless, hopeless creature; but her sorrows, her repentances and all are ended now, and she is in her grave. God rest her!'

There was a silent pause, during which, he could see how the bosom of Annabelle heaved with every respiration.

'And this was all your mystery?' said she, looking up with her eyes full of tears, and her lips quivering.

'All! and more than enough. It was to me a source of great horror, shame, and sorrow, to find my beloved sister—one whom many women loved, and all men admired; whose breast was the mansion of goodness and purity once—she, my gentle and loving sister, the child of the same father, nurtured by the same mother! and could I forsake her because she was in ad-

versity, in sorrow, and repentant, and from whom all else in the world turned?'

'Oh, Leslie!' she exclaimed, as she frankly placed both her hands in his, and he drew her towards him, saying tenderly:

'Annabelle, let me prove my faith to you—forgive me——'

'I have nothing to forgive.'

'Then let us forget the miserable past.'

She felt his breath upon her half-averted cheeks, and his low and earnest whisper in her little white ear; and then, while weeping heavily, she fell on his breast.

'My darling,' she said in a broken voice, 'if I had only known of this—how different all would have been—how much spared us! Why did you not tell me—your sister——'

'I was not aware how much appearances were against me; and with you, I became jealous of some imaginary person. I shrunk from the task at first, and you—you returned, unread, the letter which would have explained all. But you are glad now, dearest?'

'Glad! O Leslie, to any other than you, I might refrain from admitting that I have never—since the day we parted—ceased to love you; and have now learned to love you more than ever.'

'And I love you, Annabelle, with the passion that comes only once in a man's life-time!'

And so, for a time, it may be inferred that this pair were pretty oblivious of the absent Cecil in Servia, and his interests at home.

CHAPTER L.

THE TELEGRAM.

In her joy and impulsiveness, Mary actually embraced Leslie Fotheringhame, and kissed him when she heard from Annabelle of the reconciliation, and explanation of all that seemed so unpleasant and mysterious.

'Had she not loved you—yes, loved you dearly—do you

think she would have felt all this so much—so keenly and so bitterly?' said Mary to Fotheringhame.

And hearty were the congratulations of the general, who was pleased that Eaglescraig should be the scene of such an event, though love and lovers' quarrels were somewhat beyond his sympathies now; but he liked Fotheringhame, as a friend of the absent Cecil, and he had a strong regard for Annabelle, the only daughter of an old and valued Indian comrade; so the episode immediately brought to memory one of his inevitable 'up-country' reminiscences.

'Talking of lovers' quarrels,' said he, as they idled over the dessert; 'egad! I remember one which was not without some strange features. When we were in Lucknow, under Inglis—just about the time of the first outbreak of the mutiny—a pair of lovers met, who had quarrelled in some jealous pique at a ball in Chowringhee. Olive Vane was a pretty brunette, daughter of an old Sudder judge, and her Romeo was Bob Acharn—cousin of Acharn of Ours, a lieutenant of the Bengal Native Infantry. There was not a better fellow at pig-sticking, or shooting, in all India than Bob; and I remember that, at Jodpore, he watched and waited for days and nights to pot a man-eater that had made a whole village desolate.

'As people don't lose time in love affairs in India, it was fully arranged that—the quarrel made sweetly up—the lovers should be married on the 31st of May, though many there were who said that the time was not one for marrying or giving in marriage, for the rising of the Pandies at Meerut, some time before, had sent a thrill of terror through every European breast in India, and at Lucknow, as elsewhere, it was uncertain when the secret hate of the natives might burst into a flame.

'The bridal party gathered, and at the very moment the clergyman was asking the bride if she was ready, a musket-shot entered the room, and she fell, mortally wounded. It had entered her chest, and then ensued a scene which I cannot describe.

'A company of Acharn's regiment—the 71st Bengal Native

Infantry—had been brought in from the Muchee Bawn for disaffection some days before. They refused all obedience, and in vain were the black silk colours they had borne at Sobraon displayed to them. It was deemed imprudent to coerce them; and the result was that on that eventful evening —the 31st of May, the *budmashes*, or armed mob of Lucknow, rose, six thousand strong, crossed the Goomtee in wild tumult by a ford—a dark mass amid which there were thousands of glittering steel-points, rushing to join the mutineers. From one of the latter came the shot that struck down Olive Vane. We turned the great guns of the Residency upon them, and, after an hour's heavy firing, the insurrection was suppressed for a time; but a time only.

'During the attack and repulse, poor little Olive Vane lay motionless on a sofa, with young Acharn bending over her, weeping like a boy, and striving to staunch the blood that welled from the terrible wound in her bosom—a wound which the doctors declared she could not survive above an hour. When she recovered consciousness and learned the truth, her courage never quailed, but she said:

'"Bob—dearest, kiss me once again. If I am to die, I shall die worthy of you."

'"And I shall not survive you long, my darling; but there is yet time for us to be united. Come, sir, we are ready," said he to the clergyman, who, like all the rest of us, looked on with strange and haggard eyes.

'The girl's pale cheek flushed, but she was almost too weak to speak, for mental joy seemed to struggle for mastery with physical pain. What a strange sight she presented, lying there, her white bridal dress all stained with her blood, her beautiful dark brown hair all dishevelled, and looking so wan, so helpless, yet so resigned to die!

'Bob Acharn took her hand, and the chaplain proceeded with the ceremony. Thrice the quivering lips of Olive parted ere she could articulate "yes," and when she did so, it was the last word she uttered; and then a little foam came over her

lips, for she was in her parting agony. And as he concluded the ceremony the sobs of the chaplain, who hid his face in his surplice, were echoed by those of Acharn, and the old judge her father.'

'A terrible story!' exclaimed Annabelle.

'And Acharn—what became of him?' asked Mary.

'He fought against the mutineers, with what animus you may imagine. Seeking death daily, he seemed to have a charmed life, till the 5th of September, when the enemy made their last serious and desperate assault, and he was blown to pieces when they exploded a mine near Apthorp's post, and strewed the garden around it with corpses.'

Anxious that Fotheringhame should confer with the general about Cecil, Mary had listened to this Indian story, though she heard it for the first time, with some impatience.

'I do believe,' she said, laughingly, to Annabelle, 'that when the dear old man can't get an audience he tells some of his Indian stories to himself!'

'And now, Sir Piers,' said Fotheringhame, influenced by a glance from Mary, the import of which he read aright, 'about the matter which brought me here, and the subject of your many letters to Dick Freeport and myself—what is to be done about my friend Cecil? We can't leave him to risk life and limb in a wretched affair like the Servian war.'

'Of course not—of course not, my dear fellow,' replied Sir Piers: 'this self-imposed exile must be ended; he shall be restored to his regiment and to us all. I must see him again—my boy's boy—once again before I die,' he added, with sudden emotion.

'Do not speak thus,' implored Mary, caressing him.

'I have a great reparation to make, Mary—great reparation, to the dead as well as the living. I have been a vain, selfish, hard-hearted man; but I see my errors now, and shall make reparation, I say. Why should not I go to Servia in search of him?' exclaimed the old baronet, as his eye sparkled, and then he added sorrowfully: 'but I am stricken in years, and am

almost as much use in the world now as a gun without a lock, or a Scotch M.P. But we can set the wires to work, and write to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.'

'The world is a small place, after all, now; people are always rubbing up against each other,' said Fotheringhame, cheerfully; 'then there are the railways.'

'Not in Servia,' said Mary.

'Well, the international post; and it will go hard with us if we don't trace the wanderer out. Besides, if the colonel gives me leave, I may start for Servia myself.'

'You!' exclaimed Mary and Annabelle simultaneously, but in tones so different that Fotheringhame laughed; for the voice of the first was expressive of joy and gratitude, and of the second, ill-concealed alarm and dismay.

We have elsewhere shown how the sister of Count Palenka was scheming out the journey of Cecil to the frontier; so, pretty much about the same time, another journey with reference to him was schemed out by poor little Mary at Eaglescraig.

Nothing as yet was defined as to the movements of Fotheringhame, if he did adopt the idea of setting out in quest of his friend; for he had his commanding officer to study, and Annabelle, who was of more importance to him now than the F.M. commanding at the Horse Guards.

But Mary, assisted by John Balderstone, chalked out his route, as she conceived it must be, from London to Vienna and Buda-Pesth; from thence to Belgrade by steamer, as she supposed. Oh! it seemed all very plain and easy, seated over the map, which she could span with her tiny hand.

How she longed to go thither herself! So great was her impatience that not even the enchanted carpet of the Arabian tale, which transported its proprietor through the air to wherever he wished to be, in an instant, or the enchanted bridle of the famous Ayrshire 'Deil of Ardrossan,' the possessor of which could make his steed perform such wondrous feats of speed, would have sufficed her.

She was full of schemes now for communicating with Cecil, for discovering his exact whereabouts, and more than all, for bringing him safely and quickly home; while the general thought chiefly of his restoration to his former rank and position in the regiment.

Mary had seen in Robertson's charming little drama of 'Ours,' how the heroine made her way to the Crimea, amid the winter tempests, and found the wretched hut of her lover, Hugh Chalcot. Why should she not go to Servia and bring home the wanderer? Mrs. Garth would go, of course; and might not Fotheringhame and Annabelle, with whom matters were progressing so far now, make their wedding trip, if solicitors and guardians would only look sharp about contracts and settlements!

It would be quite a joyous journey if the general would only consent, for were not she and Cecil as solemnly engaged as a man and woman could be, and with the full consent and sanction of him, her only guardian! And the girl's heart seemed to go out to him, the absent and the suffering, with a futile and passionate longing.

Oh yes—yes; she saw it all, and had thought it and planned it so cleverly, with dear old John Balderstone! So they would go by London, Vienna, and Belgrade, to—she continued, as he bent over the map—to where Cecil was, for they would never—never come home without him; and in anticipation, she imagined the joy, the wonder, and the whole excitement of their sudden meeting.

But one thing did provoke her a little!

It seemed as if, in the presence of Annabelle and the new phase of their love affair, the primary object of Fotheringhame's visit took somewhat of a secondary place, till the latter, like the whole household, was terribly startled one morning, when the wishes of all were frustrated, and their hopes crushed by an appalling and bewildering Reuter's telegram, which Fotheringhame strove, but in vain, to conceal from Mary, and which ran thus:

'The ex-British officer who is now a prisoner in the camp at Deligrad, and under sentence, it is believed, of death for treason to King Milano (as the Prince of Servia names himself) and treachery to General Tchernaieff, is now known to be the same who so lately and so gallantly saved the life of the latter in the battle on the banks of the Morava, when Guebhard's troop of Lancers gave way and fled.'

'Now what on earth does all this mean?' exclaimed Fotheringhame, in blank dismay, as he read this over for the third time to Mrs. Garth, while Annabelle, who thought only of Mary, clung to his arm with her eyes full of tears.

'It is a sad—sad tragedy this of ours,' said the old lady, folding Mary to her breast; 'but, my darling pet—it may be some mistake; let us pray that it is so, and that light may came out of the darkness yet.'

'This is torture upon torture. O my God—is life worth living?' wailed Mary in her heart, asking unconsciously the question of a brilliant essayist.

CHAPTER LI.

A DARK PREDICTION.

It is perhaps impossible to describe adequately all that passed with the speed of thought through Cecil's mind when the group of Servian officials approached the room in which he was confined.

He had heard the drums beaten at sunset, and somehow deemed the falling in of the pickets—though a usual circumstance—a prelude, perhaps, to his own execution, or a hopeless and degrading transmission to some fortress, he knew not where; and where, too probably, he would never be heard of again, but pass through life chained to a heavy shot, with a number painted on his canvas caftan.

Well, death, however sudden, was better than such a fate!

For a moment or two his blood had stood still as the comers drew near, and the noise of their swords and spurs was heard on the stair. The unlocking of the door found an echo in his heart.

He nerved himself, with a prayer on his lips, to hear the worst they had to tell him—desperation and resignation curiously mingling in his mind.

'Oh why,' he muttered, 'are we born—why do we live only to endure, to suffer, and to die?'

Then he thought of the poor girl who shrunk close to him in her disguise, and a great fear for her was added to his own agony of soul.

Thus, he was rather surprised to find himself politely saluted by the minister of police, by Count Palenka, and the provost-marshal, both of whom had been so severe and sharp with him when last he saw them.

'Herr Lieutenant,' said the deputy minister of police, 'we have the pleasure of announcing to you that you are a free man—free without a stain upon your honour, and may, when you choose, return to your post.'

'His Excellency General Tchernaieff has commissioned me personally to restore to you your sword, which I do with profound pleasure,' said Count Palenka, advancing in turn, and handing to the bewildered Cecil his sword and waistbelt.

'To what do I owe this change in my affairs?' he asked in an unsteady voice, as if unable to realise the situation.

'The discovery of the true character of that villain, Mattei Guebhard!' replied Palenka.

'Guebhard—who has now deserted to the Turks, and for whose head the King now offers a reward of a thousand ducats,' added the police official.

'And when was this discovery made?'

'At noon to-day, Herr Lieutenant.'

'By whom?'

'By my sister, Margarita, who has more legal acumen than all of us put together,' replied Count Palenka; 'she asked to

see the commission found upon your person, and old Tchernaieff bluntly refused to show it even to her. But you know how lovely she is, and the spell of her power and presence—her polished *insouciance* and cultured as well as natural fascination, and how she unites the witchery of a girl to that of a woman of the world. All this proved too much for our old Cossack,' continued the count, laughing; 'he yielded—put the document in her hand, and almost immediately her quick eye detected the forgery.'

'Forgery?'

'Yes, the partial—for it was only partial—erasure of his name and substitution of yours. A touch of some chemical acid, applied by the Herr Deputy of Police, proved the truth beyond a doubt; and a rumour of this reaching Guebhard in his tent, he fled, and is now safe in the Turkish lines. So Margarita has saved you!'

'Margarita?' repeated Cecil, almost mechanically. Why, after all this discovery and removal of all suspicion of his honour, did she still mean to carry out the intended scheme of flight—even to the last moment, sending him the disguise by her maid Ottilie? To secure him to herself—could he doubt it? It was a strange and wayward idea; but any way, as matters stood now, she had loaded him with a debt of gratitude which he never could repay.

'You saved my life, as well as the life of Tchernaieff, Herr Lieutenant,' said the count, taking his hand; 'I must never forget that, and henceforward you may command me as you will.'

Cecil could not help remembering that the count's mind had been a little oblivious of the circumstance of their last interview; but, to do him and Tchernaieff justice, they were both generous and profuse in their apologies.

The minister of police was not long in detecting the sex of the terrified Ottilie as she attempted to leave the apartment, wherein her presence and disguise led to the immediate suggestion of an intrigue—which was so natural with a girl so pretty

—and after some laughter and quizzing, she was glad to let them all adopt the idea and make her escape.

So ended this somewhat melodramatic situation, of which, like Margarita, Cecil had seen many with lime-light and orchestral accompaniments, but he never thought to undergo the horror and bitterness of heart consequent to being an actor therein on the stage of real life.

So, with an emotion of gladness all the greater and more keen from the revulsion that took place in his mind, he buckled on his sword and once more went forth a soldier and a free man; his gratitude to Margarita mingling with a fierce and most unholy longing to be once again face to face with Guebhard, a chance not unlikely to be soon afforded to him by the fortunes of war.

'Welcome again, my dear fellow! glad indeed to see you!'

'By Jove! we feared it was all up with you in that cursed affair!'

Such were the greetings with a warm shake of the hand, which Cecil received from Pelham and Stanley when he visited them in the infantry camp, which was chiefly in a wood near Deligrad, and where he found them with some other officers seated near a fire, whereat a suddenly improvised meal was in process of being cooked by their Servian servants, and which consisted simply of a turkey, coated with clay and roasted in a hole covered with hot ashes; which, together with potatoes and tomatoes, was to be washed down with German beer.

'Life here is not exactly the life of flies in amber, or that of lotus-eaters,' said Pelham, laughing, after he heard the story of Cecil's misadventure; 'but even here, where we have Montenegrins and Bashi Bazouks in plenty, we don't often come across so accomplished a scoundrel as this Mattei Guebhard.'

'But, Falconer, old fellow, though a genuine Scot, brave as a lion and obstinate as a mule, he nearly proved too much for you,' said Stanley, proffering his cigar-case, 'and would have done so in the end, but for your fair auxiliary. By Jove! that girl must be a regular brick!'

'You gave the Turks an *alerte* at Alexinatz after I left the camp?' said Cecil, to change the subject.

'Your branch of the service, the cavalry, did,' replied Pelham; 'we came on with the infantry supports, and, as we had to keep our faces quite as often to our men, in leading them on, as to the enemy (you know what cowardly beggars the Servians are!), I nearly had my dorsal fin carried away by a carbine bullet. But here comes our turkey, done to time; and now to dinner with what appetite we may.'

'We have had no fighting since Alexinatz,' said Stanley, 'and our camp-life seems tame after what has gone before it.'

'Like claret on the top of champagne.'

'Man alive! for days we have had nothing better to drink than German beer, and Pelham consoles himself by expatiating on Moselle as if he had been weaned on it.'

It was as music to Cecil, hearing once again the pleasantly modulated and frank English voices of Pelham and Stanley, who made him so welcome to share their humble repast—humble in its mode of production and appurtenances—but both declared themselves sick of Servia and its army, and after another battle or two, as the novelty had worn off, they had resolved to resign and return home.

Cecil thought that he would gladly do the same; but he had no home that he knew of to return to.

He knew nothing of the round sum so kindly offered and paid by Stanley and Pelham for accounts of his safety, and the generous fellows, of course, never mentioned it to him; but neither of them knew that it eventually led to Guebhard—acting on the information of the wood-cutters—tracking him as he did to Palenka, and from thence through the forest.

It was the evening of an autumn day, late in the year. A golden light lingered on the mountain-slopes, and a soft, silvery mist rose from the oak and pine forests that clothed them. The salmon were leaping from rock to rock in a tributary of the Morava, that flowed through the camp, and cattle were herding peacefully in the valleys under the shadow of Mount Mezlanie;

and the fields of Indian corn, rice and maize were being reaped in places where the wild Turkish Timariots had many a time in the days of old swept in furious bands from Thrace to Belgrade, slaying the stalwart and young, the aged and helpless; sparing the lovely alone as their spoil; and where, in later times, the standard of Black George had led so often to victory, but never to defeat.

It was a glorious autumnal evening, and, seated there by the camp fire with pleasant English comrades, and enjoying what had long been a rarity to him, a good cigar, Cecil felt all the joyous impulses of the time—a change or relaxation of mind, after all he had so lately undergone.

'Here,' said Pelham, as he lounged on the grass at full length, a tawny beard of imposing aspect flowing over the breast of his brown infantry tunic, and smoking his briar-root with the marked laziness that follows a day of hard work and excitement, for he had been foraging in the vicinity of the enemy—'here we have to do without the thousand and one trifles that seem so necessary to one's existence in the atmosphere of Tyburnia and Belgravia; and yet, somehow, we don't seem to miss them.'

'Your rescue of Tchernaieff and Palenka in the cavalry charge, and your decoration with the Takovo cross, and so forth, have all been duly chronicled in the London papers,' said the dapper little correspondent (before mentioned) to Cecil; 'and doubtless they have been the means of sending a thrill through the breasts of the listless, *nil admirari* and languid snobs of society.'

Has *she* heard of all this? was Cecil's only thought; and the dear old Cameronians, too?

As these heedless spirits had got old of Margarita's name, and knew—but not how far, exactly—she had been woven up in the network of Cecil's late adventures, he had to undergo some raillery on the subject, and somewhat to his annoyance.

'It is an established fact in fiction and in real life—in history and in poesy,' said Stanley, twirling his long moustache and adopting a sententious tone, 'that a fellow must inevitably fall

in love with the pretty girl who nurses him after a spill in the hunting-field, after a wound received in action, and more especially if she actually saves his life; and this girl did yours, and she is downright lovely! I saw her in the iron church, on the day that Tchernaieff distributed so many crosses and medals to the troops. And you know, as Sancho Panza says, "as days go and come, and straw makes medlars ripe," in the fulness of time we may expect to see——'

'Stanley, how your idle tongue wags!'

'If it wags, it cannot be idle, Cecil; and if you are destined to marry this fair Servian, and found a race of heyducs, or whatever the deuce they are called, I suppose it is no use attempting to run away from her.'

Cecil, who knew more of what had passed between himself and Margarita than the heedless speaker had the least idea of, felt his secret annoyance increased by this banter. Owing her the most profound gratitude, as he did, and painfully aware of her rash, wild, and ill-concealed but ill-considered regard for himself—a regard by which he felt himself imperilled, rather than charmed or flattered—he could not, with patience, hear her name mentioned in this way by these thoughtless fellows—blasé waifs from the society of 'the West End.'

'By Jove, how pink he grows!' exclaimed Pelham; 'but no doubt she hopes to finish her maidenly career with you, Cecil.'

'Hush!' said the latter, with open irritation, yet laughing to conceal it if possible; 'here comes her brother.'

Wearing a very handsome Russian uniform—a green tunic faced with black velvet and laced with gold, and with several decorations glittering on his breast, the count, on foot, with his sword under his arm, approached the camp fire, and touched his flat round forage cap in salute.

'Herr Lieutenant,' said he to Cecil, 'I knew that I should find you here. I have a message to you from the general, which I know you will receive with pleasure.'

Cecil started to his feet and bowed.

'To reward you for all you have undergone, his excellency

means to give you a new opportunity for distinguishing yourself,' continued Palenka, smiling. 'You are to reconnoitre, about dawn, the country between Mount Mezlanie and the Timok river, about twenty miles from this; observe its features, what you may see, and report thereon. The picked men of your troop —your own, as yet without a captain—to the number of twenty sabres, will parade at midnight, in front of the general's quarters.'

Cecil was still on the staff, but he accepted the duty assigned with pleasure, and felt the hint conveyed, that his troop was as yet without a captain, as the latter had been killed at Alexinatz.

'I can stay with you but a few minutes, gentlemen,' said the count; 'and meantime will join you in a glass of some wine my servants have brought, in honour of the Herr Lieutenant and his victory over the jade Fortune.'

'Tokay!' exclaimed Stanley in a low voice, as he saw with interest a Cossack extracting the tiny cobwebbed bottles: 'Tokay, by all the gods!—such wine as can't be got for money, I have no doubt.'

'You are right, Herr,' said the count, who overheard him; 'they are the last of a present the Emperor gave my father—and I have just begged Tchernaieff to accept, from me, a dozen—they are all of the first brand, and from the grapes of Hegyallya.'

Other officers now came to share the count's Hungarian wine—Russian hussars in sky-blue dolmans, Servian dragoons with queer forage caps, like Scotch glengarries, and baggy red breeches; and a picturesque group the whole made, Palenka being the most striking figure there. He was very handsome, and would have formed a fine study for a painter. He had a visage naturally pale, but embrowned by exposure, a dark, martial, eagle-eye, and black moustache, with a general daring, undaunted and fiery air about him—in aspect, curiously between a man of fashion and a reckless Free Lance; a man who in thought and habit had much of the old heyduc in him, and was perhaps a little behind this unromantic, unmoved, and unheroic age.

Beside him sat Pelham, a brave and reckless fellow, but of a very different mould—under the middle size, yet a winning and aristocratic-looking Englishman, about thirty years of age, with blue eyes, and a general and genial sunshiny smile in his face.

'And where, now, is she to whom I owe so much—Mademoiselle Palenka?' asked Cecil in a low voice, when occasion served, and feeling the necessity, in common politeness at least, to remember the fact of her existence.

'She has left the camp,' was the curt response of the count, over whose face a shade fell for a moment; for some rumours —some suspicions of his sister's interest in the questioner—must have reached him, and he knew that the impulsive Margarita was difficult to control; so Cecil said no more on the subject, and, changing his place to another part of the noisy and laughing group, became somewhat silent.

He had ample food for reflection, certainly.

It was impossible for him not to think with positive wonder on all the strange complications that must have arisen had the count, and those who accompanied him, been but a very little later in coming to announce that he—Cecil—was free; and that if he had availed himself of the disguise brought by Ottilie, and reached the appointed spot where Theodore awaited him with the horses, and too probably Margarita too (indeed he could not doubt she was there), and had he taken, with her, that flight which the detection of the deserter's forgery rendered unnecessary, the whole future of both their lives must have been changed from that hour; for it was evident that she had meant to cast her lot in life with him, and for all she knew or could foresee, her one life against a censorious world.

'We must never meet again—I must see her no more!' was his thought again and again, and he was conscious that the count was looking at him scrutinisingly from time to time. The usually heedless and unobservant Pelham detected this, and said to Palenka inquiringly:

'Why do you look so gravely—so sadly at our friend, with whom you were laughing but a few minutes ago?'

'Sadly—do I? Well, sooth to say, I feel somewhat sorry for him.'

'Why—what the deuce is up now?'

'I am rather an acute physiognomist,' replied the count, looking down and affecting to select and manipulate a cigar, 'and think I can see—can read in his face, by a certain gravity of expression there, that he will—after all he has escaped—die a violent death.'

'*A violent death!*' repeated Pelham, with an expression of surprise in his face; 'from what do you gather this?'

'I cannot say—a kind of prescience—an intuition of destiny—that I have no control over; but I have rarely been mistaken.'

'Well,' replied Pelham, 'I might predict as much about many of us: we may perhaps be engaged to-morrow, and some that are above the turf just now, may be under it soon enough.'

The count gave an inscrutable smile, and began to smoke; and Pelham was very glad that Cecil—going, as he was so soon to do, on a duty of some peril—had not overheard a prediction so strange and gloomy concerning himself.

'Destiny—prescience—bosh!' thought Pelham; but the count's face and manner impressed the volatile Englishman, who had only come to fight in Servia as the means to a 'new sensation.' He became perplexed, silent; and when Cecil spoke, his voice seemed somehow to stir a painful chord in the breast of Pelham.

'A violent death!'

This strange prophecy gave him some cause to think. Did the count refer to the chances of war, or that Cecil was foredoomed prematurely, and had his destiny—his *kismet*, like an Osmanlie—written on his brow? Or was it that he resented, with all his apparent candour and generosity, some love-passages between his sister and the late prisoner, and meant to have the latter cut off?—a matter easily achieved in that lawless land.

Pelham was restlessly uneasy on the subject, and sat reflectively sucking at his briar-root in silence, till the bugles sounded for lights and fires out—for silence in camp, and all retired to their tents or huts.

At midnight, punctually, Cecil, cloaked and armed, rode to the headquarters of Tchernaieff, in front of which he found his troop mounted, and a sergeant calling the roll by lantern-light, the rays of which fell feebly on the dark faces and darker uniforms of the Servian troopers, who were all in light marching order, without valises or other encumbrance, save forage-nets, sponge-bags and spare shoes. By lantern-light he opened the ranks and inspected them; the pistols and carbines were loaded. From Palenka he got a written memorandum of the path or route he was to pursue, though much was left to his own discretion.

The party, consisting of twenty sabres, broke into sections of fours.

'*Shagoum-marche!*' (walk-march) was the first command, and they got into motion.

'*Rishu!*' (trot) cried Cecil, and away they went, and quickly left the camp behind them, looking somewhat ghost-like amid the starless gloom, as they glided noiselessly over the soft turf, on which, as yet, the hoofs of their horses made no sound.

CHAPTER LII.

THE RECONNAISSANCE.

YOUNG soldier though he was in some respects, Cecil knew well the importance of the duty assigned to him, and the great circumspection requisite in the mode of executing it; all the more as Circassian and Egyptian cavalry had been but recently heard of in the vicinity of Rajouz, a village about five miles from Deligrad.

Whatever Cecil did, he usually gave his heart to; and he was doubly anxious to prove himself worthy of the renewed

trust and faith reposed in him by Tchernaieff, and to stifle the qualms of disgust he had begun to feel for the Servian service, and which usually rise, sooner or later, in the heart of every Briton at any foreign service, and which was the more likely to influence Cecil by the memory of late events.

As his party rode on at a leisurely walk, after quitting the vicinity of the camp, the hoofs tramping out the rich odours of the fallen leaves and aromatic plants, he gave strict orders that there was to be no smoking (lest lights, even so small, were seen), and that there must be no talking or singing—that utter silence must pervade every movement.

His party had food for three days; thus he halted and fed the horses at every two leagues, so that they should always be fresh and fit for duty, taking care to halt in thickets, or at a distance from all roads, and using every precaution to preclude surprise while the feeding was in process, and the horses consequently unbitted.

He was furnished with a guide, whom, however, he kept ignorant of the route indicated to him by Tchernaieff—the line of country towards the Timok river.

He knew, too, that an officer, be his rank what it may, can never, with honour, decline the perilous duty of a reconnaissance, as the honour is amply made up by the importance of the expedition, which frequently proves of the utmost consequence in the operations of the future.

Thus, when day began to dawn, and he found himself traversing the fields and forest lands on the eastern slopes of Mount Mezlanie, while moving with the utmost care and circumspection, with two advanced troopers some distance in front, riding each with loaded carbine on thigh, he began his notes and task of surveying, by minutely examining the face of the country, the hollows and vales, whether stony or swampy; the grass and the watercourses; the line of the principal roads, their turnings, breadth, and capability for the passage of artillery; the situation of farmhouses or villages, and their capabilities for defence; the bridges, etc.—and all the memoranda

thereon he extended and corrected during the halts for refreshing the men and horses.

Particularly had he to note where grass, hay, and corn could be procured, in case of an advance in that direction; with the proper ground for camps, with fuel and water in the vicinity, and so forth, omitting nothing that might prove of value to his leaders. And in this new species of employment the first day passed without event, and the approach of evening found his party preparing to halt for the night in a thicket of oaks and pines, under the shadow of some lofty and impending precipices, the fronts of which glared redly in the western light, above the deep green of the forest trees.

A line of silvery haze, exhaled by the evening sun, winding among them, indicated the course of the Timok river, which descends from the south side of Mount Haiduchki, of the Balkan chain in Servia, and flows along the confines of Bulgaria till it reaches the Danube. So the river was almost in sight, and as yet neither Cecil nor his troopers had 'felt' the Circassian or Egyptian cavalry; and everywhere the country seemed quiet, the peasantry attending in peace to their agricultural avocations.

Near the halting-place lay a deep pool surrounded by cedars and pines; rich boughs drooped into its water, on which the snow-white lilies floated, and there the horses were unbitted, and they and their riders drank thirstily.

By dawn next day all were in their saddles again, and the reconnaissance was resumed.

Sharply observant, though naturally unsuspicious, Cecil had, ere this, begun to remark that an armed peasant, with a large black beard—but all men were armed there, and then especially—who had questioned the advanced file of men and obtained from them a light for his pipe, appeared to dodge or watch his party, which rode at an easy pace, and from time to time he saw this peasant appearing on the crest of one slope, as they began to descend another.

Disliking this, he sent a corporal back at a trot to question

this fellow and demand his object or purpose; but the latter eluded this by disappearing in a thicket, only, as it eventually proved, to follow still, but unseen and more warily.

As the road traversed one of those warm valleys where, in Servia, the cotton-plant is raised in great quantities, and where the plantations present so pleasing an appearance, the glossy dark green leaves contrasting so finely with the white globular flowers scattered over the tree, Cecil's party overtook three mounted persons—a man and two females—who, after a consultation among themselves apparently, checked their horses to let his troopers come up with them.

As they drew near them, Cecil felt his pulse quicken. There was no mistaking the brown habit faced with scarlet, the smart hat and white ostrich feather, and the graceful figure of the wearer, or the old-dragoon seat of her male attendant. For here was Margarita, accompanied by old Theodore, and the third mounted personage was the pretty Ottilie.

'Margarita again—and here! By Jove! there *is* some fatality in all this!' thought Cecil; and he spurred in advance of his party, and joined the trio, two of whom at once reined their horses back; and one of them, Ottilie, coloured very deeply, for she was not ignorant of the grotesque rumours that had been current concerning the disguise in which she had been found.

'You here, Herr Lieutenant!' exclaimed Margarita, with genuine surprise, while placing her whip in her bridle-hand, she presented the other to Cecil; 'here northward of Mount Mezlanie?'

'I am reconnoitring—and you?'

'Am *en route* for Palenka; then *viâ* Belgrade for Vienna.'

If she thought to interest him by this intelligence she failed, for he said:

'I am glad to hear that you are leaving this district, for we know not which way the tide of war may roll; and the fact of your being here without an escort is most rash, as patrols of Circassian and Egyptian horse have been seen between the Timok and the Morava.'

'We are now within ten miles of Palenka, and have seen nothing as yet to alarm us,' she replied.

Palenka was in a safe district; but who could count on what might lie between? Why should he not escort her so far, when he was free to do so, as his command was a roving one? and Palenka lay on the west side of the Timok, and in the district he was to examine.

Her eyes sparkled and her colour heightened as he announced his intention; and they rode slowly on together, he the while, with all the interest that he could not help feeling in her, wishing in his heart that she was safe in Belgrade, Vienna, or anywhere else than by his side.

She thanked him for the proffered escort.

'Say nothing of that,' said he; 'I owe you so much more than I can ever repay.'

'You owe me a debt, I know; yet it might be best adjusted by our forgetting—as if we had never known—each other.'

'Margarita, who that has seen and known you will ever forget you?' he asked, with truth in his voice and eye.

'Many, I have no doubt.'

Her manner was somewhat bitter and weary, and from under her long dark eye-lashes she looked at him, from time to time, with a kind of passionate pain.

'One fact I shall never forget, at least—that you saved me from great and deadly peril, by your acumen and superior intelligence.'

'By my suspicion of Guebhard and general knowledge of his character, and of what he is capable—say, rather.'

'And thus you rendered my flight from Deligrad unnecessary?'

'Yes,' she replied curtly.

On that point he said no more. She coloured for a moment at his reference to it, and then became pale again; but paleness was the normal condition of her face.

This brilliant woman loved him, and had not cared much to conceal that she did so.

What was he to say to her—what to tell—how to explain all?

It was impossible for him to put in clear, cold words before her the mortifying fear that he could not—should not love her in return, because he was affianced—so hopelessly, as he supposed—to another.

Could he ask her to take back a heart he certainly had never sought? It was in every way a perplexing and grotesque situation.

'You have become very silent,' said she in a tone of pique, while switching and then checking her horse. 'Of what are you thinking?'

'That if some of those wild Circassians, of whom I have been told, were only to appear now——'

'Heaven forbid! why?'

'That I might empty a saddle or two, and risk in your service the life you saved, and thus make an atonement——'

'I want no such risk run; and what,' she asked a little sharply, 'do you mean by atonement?'

'Only this, that you saved my life, Margarita, and may claim its whole future, if you will,' said he, while Mary's face came reproachfully to memory, for the speech was disloyalty to her, however gallantly meant to Margarita, whom the peculiarity of its tenor irritated rather than flattered.

'This is an idle speech, and I know its value. I thank you for your escort, but we shall part at Palenka, and as another day will see me on the road for Vienna, we shall never meet again; and you may become to me, what I shall never be to you—a dream, without pain perhaps.'

This was one of her many strange and passionate speeches, his general or vague replies to which always piqued her.

'Youth and pleasure are a dream,' said he.

'And life itself, say some.'

'But these metaphysicians do not tell us where or how we shall wake to find it so—unless in death.'

'Enough of a subject so gloomy and abstruse,' said she sharply, for Cecil's strange indifference galled and piqued her keenly.

Though a fashionably-bred woman, and as a girl accustomed to the best society in Vienna, in wild Servia she was certainly rather untrammelled by the bonds of conventionality. Her life from young girlhood had been full of gaiety, variety, vivid colour, and very rational pleasure. She had been the object of much adulation, admiration, and love too; she had been amused or bored by all, but won by none till now, when Cecil, the wanderer, the soldier of fortune, with no inheritance but his sword, had won her regard without seeking it.

She was assured now—bitterly so—that he would never kneel to her as a lover; yet she was loth that he should ever free himself from the power of her fascinations, if she could make him feel it. Fain would she have won that heart which seemed so fresh and guileless, so unlike any she had yet met—so unworn and prone to have good faith in all men.

There was a certain languor and then occasional fiery carelessness in Margarita that must have come to her with the blood of the old heyduc of Palenka, and his bride—some odalisque, perhaps, won by the edge of his sabre amid the plunder of a pasha's household, and hers was the disposition, the passion, and the situation, that so often lead to blind and bitter hatred, ending in crime and sorrow.

She knew the power of her beauty over all men, and she knew also the claim for special gratitude over this loyal, dauntless, and grateful heart, and hoped that she knew how to use both; thus many a time she looked at him with her bright, languid eyes, the colour of which was often difficult to define, with an expression which seemed to say:

'I saved your life and honour—therefore you ought to belong to me, and to no one else!'

And Cecil found it impossible to deny, even to himself, the knowledge and certainty that this woman, so dazzlingly fair that few women ever saw her without jealousy, and fewer men without admiration or passion, had been ready—and was now ready—to risk shame, suffering or danger, and fly with him, seeking obscurity and exile in Bulgaria or anywhere else.

'Was ever man more tempted!' thought he, as he saw—with satisfaction—the gilded vanes and cupolas of Palenka glittering in the sunshine above the green-wooded bank of the Morava, and he reined up his horse to bid her farewell.

'You will surely ride up to Palenka, and bid mamma adieu?' she said, her eyes dilating with reproach.

'To visit Palenka, or anywhere else, is inconsistent with my duty; and the count, your brother, viewed my sojourn there with ill-concealed displeasure.'

'As you please,' said she coldly. Then, after a pause, she added, 'We have resolved to leave Servia, mamma and I, for a time—my brother wishes us to do so.'

'I would fain see you once again,' said he, with an access of tenderness, suited, however, to the occasion; 'but it may not be. To-night I shall halt in the wood near Tjuprija, and to-morrow go back on the spur to Deligrad.'

'The wood near Tjuprija—that is close at hand; so if we who have been so strangely thrown together are parted to meet no more in the future, and you would care to see me once again—just once—at noon to-morrow be by the wayside chapel on the rocks above the ruin—the chapel of Lazar—and—' she paused, as a spasm of pain made her proud and beautiful face quiver, 'and I shall be there.'

'At noon, then, to-morrow,' said he, bending over her gauntleted hand and kissing it, after which she rode off at a quick pace, followed by her two attendants, while Cecil fell back and rejoined his troopers, who made all haste to put out and hide the pipes in which they had—in defiance of orders—been indulging during his recent preoccupation in front of them.

At the same time a man—the bearded peasant before mentioned—who had been concealed among some laurel-bushes, and had overheard the parting, crept stealthily away, with an expression on his face that would have startled Cecil had he seen it.

'To what end, or to what useful or wise purpose, under all

the circumstances, can this assignation be—and in such a lonely place?' he thought. 'But what could I say—how decline the last request of one to whom I owe so much?'

Yet he wished it all well over, and anticipated, with genuine British dismay, something of a painful scene.

The night was passed by his troopers peacefully in the solitude of the wood referred to, under the stars. Morning came in bright with ruddy sunshine, and after such a humble repast as soldiers prepare under such circumstances, Cecil ordered them to unbit and unsaddle their horses, groom them, and re-examine all their ammunition—not all at once, but by fours at a time; and after patrolling the woods in the vicinity, and finding all quiet, he halted them again in the wood, and set forth to keep his appointment at the chapel, which was on a rocky steep about a mile from it.

He crossed the Morava by an ancient bridge, supposed to be the work of Roman hands, and began to ascend the steep and rocky bank that overhung it, till he overlooked the windings of the river and the woods that half-concealed them, and attained the summit of a species of pass in which stood the wayside chapel—merely a rough species of altar, whereon was painted a rude and half-defaced effigy, surmounted by a projecting pediment or roof of red tiles.

Masses of wild vines flourished in luxuriance all around it, with other creepers; and from amid these there peered grotesquely forth—with its metal halo sorely faded—the effigy, which was supposed to represent the Servian *Krall*, Lazar, who was taken prisoner in the last great battle on the plains of Kossava (which ended in the subjugation of Servia), and whose relics, after his murder in the camp of the Sultan Amurath, have wrought so many miracles, according to the superstition of his country, and now lie in the monastery of Ravenitza, which he founded; but Cecil thought nothing of all this, and probably knew nothing about it, as he looked about him anxiously and in haste for Margarita.

It was past the time of noon now; but she was not there. A sheer cliff of vast height, the base of which could not be seen, descended on one side; on the other was the narrow walk by which he had mounted to the wayside chapel.

He heard no sound but the voices of the birds, and he looked in vain for her figure—her drapery floating between the stems of the trees.

Why had she failed to keep her tryst? a kind of keen disappointment occurred to him now; he looked at his watch again. Time was long past now, and he thought of his troopers and the homeward march to Deligrad.

Then, as he looked about him, his eye fell on two objects that gave him a shock, a bracelet and a handkerchief. The former lay imbedded in the turf, as if trod upon; the other fluttered on the stem of a wild vine.

He took up the former, a Turkish rose-pearl bracelet, which he remembered to have seen Margarita wear; so she must have come to the meeting-place and lost it. But why had she come and gone so soon?

The handkerchief, a white silk one, he examined, and on a corner thereof saw the name of 'Mattei Guebhard.'

Guebhard—then he too had been there; had in some way anticipated him! And now he saw that all the turf about the narrow path bore the indentations of feet, as if a struggle had taken place, and a great horror of—he knew not what—fell upon the heart of Cecil.

He thought of the Circassian and Egyptian patrols, who were said to be scouting between the Morava and the Timok, but he thought not of the peasant who had dogged his party yesterday.

Had Guebhard succeeded in carrying her off—in abducting her beyond the Turkish lines? If so, in these days of Bulgarian atrocities, Cecil could but fear the worst, and his heart died within him as he returned, slowly and reluctantly, and with many a backward glance, to the road, where his troopers awaited him.

There was no time given him for inquiry, no time for further delay, and at a rapid trot the homeward march began.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE WAYSIDE CHAPEL.

On the morning of the same day, Margarita was surprised to receive a note, purporting to be from Cecil, whose handwriting she had never seen, requesting her to be at the wayside chapel of Krall Lazar two hours before noon, as the exigencies of the service required his presence elsewhere at the time formerly appointed.

This note had been given to Theodore by a man attired like a peasant, who promptly disappeared.

'Sooner than noon!' thought Margarita; 'perhaps he is impatient to see me. He does love me—he must love me. But perhaps some dread of Palenka fetters his tongue; or can it be —but let me not think *that*!'

Never had Ottilie found her mistress more difficult to please in the mode of dressing her beautiful hair, than on the morning of this day, in the selection of a costume and the choice of colours; but at last she was attired to her own satisfaction, and when the time came, left Palenka by a garden-gate, and took the path that led to the wayside chapel, or altar, for, though named the former, it had rather the character of being the latter only.

Like Cecil, she, with all her hopes and wishes, had more than once questioned herself as to the end or utility of this meeting which it had been—she felt it—so unwomanly in her to invite.

She could not yet bear the idea that he should pass out of her life, or she out of his. She dreaded an unknown rival, as she had never been baffled before; and over that rival, if such

existed, she hoped in the end to triumph by the power of her beauty and fascination of manner, and to win him, without pity, to herself; and, full of such thoughts, she trod lightly the steep and winding way that led to the shrine of Krall Lazar, and softly sang to herself the little Servian song of 'The Wishes,' which elsewhere she had sung to Cecil.

The morning was a glorious one, and in the poetry of her nature Margarita felt all the softening and exhilarating influences of it. The heavy fragrance of the great fir forest, on which the night-dew lingered, loaded the air, and the rays of the sun fell aslant its trees here and there, through the flat and fan-like boughs, from which the great, over-ripe cones, brown and full of seed, were dropping ever and anon.

A sea of pines, dark-green and sombre, seemed to spread in spiky conical peaks up the steep mountain-slopes, as she proceeded by the narrow pathway to the appointed place, her heart beating hopefully and happily in anticipation.

At last she reached the vine-covered shrine; it stood alone; no one was there.

'Cecil!' she said softly, and listened.

Then came a sound as of branches crackling, and a man clad like a Servian peasant started from behind the edifice and stood before her; but through the disguise, now minus the beard, and with close-shaven chin and well-trimmed black moustache, she knew the pale face of—Mattei Guebhard.

'You here?' exclaimed Margarita, shrinking back.

'Yes, I,' said he grimly; 'you got a note——'

'From—from the Herr Lieutenant.'

'No; from *me*.'

'You?'

'In his name,' said Guebhard, laughing softly; 'could I have lured you here, else?'

'Decidedly not,' she replied, with perplexity and anger. 'But how knew you that I was to be here?'

'Every movement of yours is known to me.'

'And your purpose?' asked Margarita.

'I scarcely know—punishment—revenge!' he replied, incoherently and a little wildly.

As he surveyed her now he saw not a vestige of her soft, persuasive, and caressing manner, or the witchery of her sovereign smile. Her face expressed only deep anger, profound disdain, and utter indifference by turns; yet he attempted to take her hand, but she wrenched it away and waved him back, with a grandeur of gesture that compelled him to obey, while her eyes flashed with unspoken indignation.

It was at this moment that the rose-pearl bracelet fell from her wrist, but both were too preoccupied to observe it.

'You visited the English cur in his prison?' said he, after a pause.

'Who told you so?'

'Heed not who told me so—suffice it that I know you did.'

'What then? Am I accountable to you for my actions?'

'This morning you are.'

'Fool—you forget yourself!'

Guebhard looked into her cool and defiant face, and read but too plainly an expression of hatred in her beautiful eyes. He saw the curl of careless scorn on her sweet red lips, and a sigh of rage escaped him, though for a moment—but a moment only—his eyes sought hers with an anguish of entreaty.

'Perjurer and deserter!' said she defiantly and bitterly; 'the soldier who is false to his colours—the man who is false to his country—is beneath rebuke; but not beneath vengeance.'

'You saved the man's life on one hand,' said he, hoarsely; 'on the other, you exposed me, compelling me to anticipate an old intention of joining the Turkish standard, which must prevail here and elsewhere. You saved his life and won his gratitude and love; but neither will avail, for by the God who hears us, you shall never see him more!'

'Who will separate us?'

'I shall!'

'Stand aside, Captain Guebhard!' said she haughtily, and now dreading every moment to hear the step of Cecil ascend-

ing the path; 'stand aside—from this day you and I must be to each other as the dead.'

'As the dead—yes—be it so. I know you hate me now—though once you did not do so.'

'I never even valued you as a friend, though you flattered yourself that you stood even higher than a friend in my estimation; and now as a deserter from the Servian cause——'

'I am more Bulgarian than Servian in my blood, perhaps more Italian than either,' said he, hotly. 'Milano omitted to give me the cross, though I had won it in our first battle, so I have assumed the crescent in its place; that is all—and the crescent will prevail in the end.'

'Never! we shall live to see the crescent thrust into Asia or the sea; but as I did not come here to talk politics, I have the honour to wish you good morning, Captain Guebhard, and trust that our comedietta is over.'

'It is a tragedy, as you may find,' was the grim and menacing response.

'What do you mean, sir?'

'Simply what I say.'

'Insolent! But I fear you will never make your fortune as a Romeo.'

Oaths never rose to the lips of Guebhard; he was—though a finished villain—too polished a man to indulge in such: but terrible was the hatred that baffled passion was now raising in his lawless breast. A dark and angry red shot for a moment across his usually pallid face, and his eyes gleamed with a vindictiveness of expression that made the heart of Margarita throb wildly, and with sudden apprehension; but she could not pass him.

Behind her was a precipice, and before her—barred by him—lay the path which she must descend to elude him.

Like a heroine, who is described in a recent novel, 'she knew well enough that forgetfulness was a treasure for evermore beyond the reach of those who once loved her.' Guebhard had loved her, she knew, and this love had well-nigh maddened

him—and now Guebhard, in his tiger-like nature, was beginning to hate her—nay, hated her already!

He grasped her delicate wrist with a force she could not withstand.

'Listen to me,' said he, with calm yet sad ferocity in his tone and eyes; 'I am not the first, among many, whom your beauty and your wiles have fooled and beguiled—for few women have had such Circe-like power as you—but I shall be the last on whose face you will look.'

'What do you mean?' she asked, in a low and agitated voice.

'That you will soon learn—come here,' he continued, hoarsely; 'here—and look down,' he added, dragging her to the giddy verge of the beetling cliff, at the base of which, spread out like a map, was the woody landscape stretching away towards Katadar, with the Morava winding through it like a silver snake.

'Have pity, Guebhard!' exclaimed Margarita, shrinking back, while a mortal terror seized her now, for the expression of his eyes froze her heart.

'Pity—it is too late—too late!' he replied, yet with something like a sob in his throat.

'Forgiveness is saint-like, Guebhard,' she urged piteously.

'But I am no saint, Margarita — I am only a humble mortal.'

'Mortal or not—man or devil—why have I to seek forgiveness of *you*?' she exclaimed, as a gust of indignation and pride came to her aid, and she strove to break away from him; but finding that all her efforts were vain, and that he was too strong for her, she shrieked out wildly, 'Cecil! Cecil!'

The name seemed to madden him. Stung to frenzy, he drew a pistol from his belt; but replaced it, and grasped his yataghan; that, too, he declined to use, lest it might elicit a shriek again and bring succour, for with all his frenzy, there was a method in his madness, and his next thought was—strangulation!

The proud and lovely neck she would not have permitted him

to kiss was now to feel the tiger-like clutch of his long, lean and felon fingers, as they closed round her snow-white throat.

'Mercy, Guebhard—mercy!' she gasped; 'I am too young—too young—perhaps too wicked—to die!'

Fate was upon her, and Guebhard was no longer a reasoning being. There were tears in her starting and bloodshot eyes, and clamorous fury gathered in Guebhard's heart, while his infernal gripe grew closer; her arms fell powerless by her side—he felt the tumultuous heavings of her bosom against his own. Sense had not left her; she could not doubt the desperate character of his attack, and though she ceased to struggle, her eyes spoke, and with such a language that Guebhard dared not look on them again—they seemed so mournfully to implore his mercy—but his heart, blazing with the insensate hate that springs from baffled love, knew none!

In vain; his gripe grew tighter upon her delicate throat, that was all symmetry and whiteness: a terrible spasm convulsed her frame; then he knew that all was over, that she was dead in his hands, and daring no more to look upon her, he flung her over the awful cliff close by; and that he might not hear the sound, if any, that came from below, he sank on his knees, and covered his ears with his hot tremulous hands. So perished Margarita!

Her death was not the first that lay on Guebhard's soul, no doubt; but, for a minute, he scarcely seemed to breathe, and his wild glaring eyes seemed to wander stealthily in the air, in the woods, and on the ground beneath him; as if to avoid the last glance of appealing despair, that seemed to confront him everywhere now.

The leaves of the trees seemed to become eyes—then tongues that whispered, he knew not what.

'Margarita!' said he involuntarily, and, to his overstrained fancy, a thousand echoes seemed to give back the name of the dead—the dead girl that, though mangled and lying far down below, was not yet cold.

'Margarita!' he said again, but in a lower voice, the name

breaking from him in the instinct of the awful time, rather than in conscious utterance.

Suddenly the sound of approaching footsteps met his ear. A man was ascending the pathway to the shrine, and Guebhard, who, in the agony and frenzy of the time, had forgotten all about Cecil—for it was he who was coming—dashed into the copse-wood and fled from the spot like a hunted hare, seeking the gloomiest spots with that loathing of the light which it has been averred some murderers feel.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE BATTLE OF ZAITCHAR.

'How misfortune seems to dog me, and all in whom I have ever had a passing interest or regard!' thought Cecil, as he rode on in rear of his returning party, and recalled the words of Antonio:

> 'I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano;
> A stage, where every man must play a part,
> And mine a *sad one*.'

His thoughts went backward over the few but ever-varying years of his own life; his wanderings with his mother in Italy and elsewhere; his service in India, so full of adventure, change, peril and vivid colour; marches over dusty and arid plains, and through desert jungles, where luxuriant vegetation had run riot for ages; the pleasures of cities; the careless times in camp and barrack, with Leslie Fotheringhame, Dick Freeport, Acharn and others; pig-sticking and fighting wild hill tribes; of long balmy nights on the starlit Indian or Arabian seas, while the crowded transport ploughed on with her living freight; the good fellowship of the splendid mess; the love of his men, and though remembered last, perhaps, not least, honest

Tommy Atkins, with the proffer of his savings; of all that had been, and never could be again; of gay nights and balls; and, last of all, the ball that ruined him; of Mary Montgomerie, and all the loss of her meant to him; and again his thoughts would revert to Margarita, and to what had been—what could be now, her fate!

Into that fate—if, as it seemed too probable, some tragedy or catastrophe had happened—he had neither time nor opportunity given him to inquire.

What could have come over her? was his ever-recurring thought. Surely—even in that land of atrocities—Heaven would be too merciful to let a hair of her head be injured, she was so good and pure, so proud and true to herself and all.

Betimes he rode into Deligrad, where the tricolour waved on the armed rampart, and the busy camp, with its streets of tents and huts, still covered all the ground beside the Morava.

He proceeded straight to the winter quarters of the staff, circular huts formed of logs, planked and plastered with mud externally, and thatched with straw and reeds, and in one of these miserable abodes, before which two sentinels paced, he found Tchernaieff and a couple of officers, in rich Russian uniforms, smoking cigars and making themselves as comfortable as they could under the circumstances.

He presented his papers, sketches and memoranda, and made his report as to finding all the country quiet, and seeing nothing of the enemy's scouting or patrol parties; and was warmly complimented by the grim old Muscovite, who shook him by the hand and presented him with an acceptable bumper of wine, saying the while, 'Deo Gratios!' and signing the cross in the Russian fashion with three fingers from right to left.

'I sent you again on a perilous and important duty into a strange country,' said Tchernaieff, 'and you accepted the hazard as readily as you have performed that duty.'

'I am not used to weigh hazards or danger, excellency,' replied Cecil; 'I am the native of a country that never nurtured fools or cowards, and now have my home here.'

'In every land brave men find a home; and for these memoranda I thank you, for I have to send troops through that very district towards Zaitchar. But you have run greater risks than you are aware of, for Circassian troops were concealed in some of the woods through which you passed.'

Cecil thought of the disappearance of Margarita, and the evidence of the deserter Guebhard's presence at the Krall Lazar; but he only replied:

'I have not set much store on my life, since I came to Servia, at least. Besides, general—of what need was thought—I had your orders to obey—the King to serve.'

'Right; and now, good-morning, Captain Falconer.'

It was so; Cecil found that he had been made captain of his troop, and was warmly congratulated on this unexpected promotion by his English comrades Pelham and Stanley, whose society he preferred to all others in camp, and the former said laughingly to the latter, whom he had taken into his confidence:

'Either the count is—as I hope—a false prophet, or Falconer's fated time is not come yet; he has returned scatheless from this duty, at all events.'

The field was soon to be taken by a portion, if not by all the army; more fighting was to be seen, and Cecil, in the overcharged state of his mind, welcomed the chance of new excitement with a strange species of grim joy.

But now came tidings that, when returning for the headquarters of General Dochtouroff, Count Palenka had fallen into the hands of a Circassian patrol, been made prisoner, and carried, whether to death or captivity, none knew; so that he, anyway, was ignorant of the crime, or catastrophe, that had darkened his home.

At this time, some twelve battalions of Turks occupied the town of Zaitchar, which lies seventy miles north-eastward of Deligrad, on the river Timok, and in the attack on which, on the 18th of the preceding July, Colonel Kireef, one of the bravest officers of the Russian army, fell, after receiving four wounds in succession.

This position was now watched by only a brigade of Servians, under Colonel Medvidovski, a young officer concerning whose movements and rashness Tchernaieff became apprehensive; thus he desired General Dochtouroff to repair to that place for the purpose of aiding the colonel with his advice and experience, and soon after he reinforced him by a few Servians, among whom was Cecil's troop of cavalry, which was ordered to proceed by the Bovan Pass, up which his troopers toiled slowly in an autumn evening, and from the summit of which a vast expanse of woody country could be seen, wearing all the varied tints of the season. A twelve miles march brought him to Banja, where he halted for a time, and then resumed his route over the mountains, by a path sometimes so narrow that he had to reduce his sections of fours to files, but all pushed on unwearyingly and full of enthusiasm, as a battle in the vicinity of Zaitchar was confidently anticipated.

In the ranks of the army against which they were marching now was, no doubt, his bitter enemy, Mattei Guebhard, commissioned and with rank, probably, because of his defection, and Cecil knew that in close quarters the rascal, if possible, would be sure to seek *him* out.

'Well,' thought he, 'he is right welcome to do so;' aware that if once he got Mattei Guebhard covered by his pistol or within reach of his sword it would go hard with him if one red fez was not struck to the dust.

The smoke of burning hamlets, which had fallen a prey to bands of Bashi Bazouks, curled up here and there through the russet, green and yellow of the woods, on either side of the line of march, indicating the close approach to the vicinity of the enemy, whose troops were mustering near the Timok, after crossing which, by a wooden bridge, Cecil could see the white-walled houses of Zaitchar shining in the sun; but from thence he had to proceed, by marching in the night, into the valley of Krivovirski Timok, where he overtook the troops under General Dochtouroff, to whom he instantly reported himself, and Colonel Medvidovski, pushing on for the great business of the day.

The cavalry cloaks were rolled up and buckled to the saddles, girths and bridle reins carefully inspected, the edges of the swords tested, and the loading of all revolvers and carbines looked to.

A drizzling rain had fallen overnight, and a dim, silvery haze was floating up from the dark woodlands and the deep valley through which the Timok was rolling away to meet the Danube, and the occasional boom of a heavy gun pealing through the murky morning air, followed now and then by a sharp rattle of rifle-muskets, indicated that the column of Count Keller, who was acting in concert with Dochtouroff, and had already got into action, had been partially repulsed, and was retiring.

'Push on!' was the cry on every hand.

'*Rishu* (trot), *galloppe!* (gallop)' were the orders for the cavalry, and in sections of fours that arm of the service went quickly to the front, and with loud cheers, though to the infantry was assigned most of the grim work to be done that day.

Cecil, in India, and more recently in Servia, had been too often under fire to feel any novelty in the situation now. Rather reckless, he had no particular anxiety so far as concerned his own safety or ultimate escape. He had but one distinct idea: that rather than be disabled by a wound, and thus rendered helpless, homeless, and penniless, he would prefer death outright!

He felt for a time a little tightening of the chest as the hollow boom of the cannon on the left front became louder and louder; but even that sensation passed away, and he rode on with much of indifference, varied at times by that emotion which a true soldier—especially a soldier of fortune—can never be without—a desire for distinction and honour.

The whole scene around him was inspiriting and full of the highest excitement. Heavily laboured the horses of the artillery to get the guns and ponderous waggons up the steep ascents that overhung the river. At each recurring rise the drivers flogged and spurred, and the gunners pushed behind, or with sinewy hands urged round the spokes of the wheels;

horses stumbled, and traces strained to the verge of breaking, till the hill crests were won, and the downward progress began.

Fifteen thousand Servians and Russians were forming in columns for the attack, and the bright sheen of bayonets and swords flashing in the morning sun came out of their sombre masses of brown, grey, and dark green. Over the former waved the tricolours of Milano Obrenovitch; but the black eagle and tricolour of the 'Monarch of the Snows' were displayed by the latter.

Zaitchar was to be the centre of the operations, and to maintain that position were sixteen thousand Turks or more, who had covered it with earthworks and batteries for three miles in front of the town, defending it in the form of an arc.

Many of the Servian regiments were armed with old muzzle-loaders and smooth-bores, while the blue-clad Turks, whose fezzes in long scarlet lines dotted out the position, had breech-loading Snider rifles and Krupp cannon; so the two armies were far from being equally matched, either in appointments or valour.

Count Keller's column, descending from the mountains on the south coast, was to co-operate with Dochtouroff against Zaitchar; Medvidovski's column formed the centre, and other brigades and columns, led by leaders who have no connection with our story, and whose barbarous names would only puzzle the reader, made up the force which menaced the little town of Zaitchar in the form of a semicircle, at an average radius of seven miles.

The cracking of rifles and the white spurts of smoke starting up from fields, green hedges, and other enclosures, indicated the commencement of the attack, as some companies in skirmishing order were thrown out on right and left, and then came the thunder of the Krupp guns from Veliki Izvor, the chief point of the Turkish position.

In their brown tunics and blue, glengarry-like caps, the Servian columns were closing steadily up, with loud hoarse cheers and cries; but louder and higher above them rang the 'Allah-

Allah Hu!' of the more confident and resolute Turkish infantry.

From a five gun-battery on the right, Herzberg, a skilful officer, was throwing shells with great precision among the latter, and Cecil viewed with growing interest a column of Servian infantry deploying from that point with greater skill and order than he had seen in Servia before, as it was led by two brave and well-trained British officers, Pelham and Stanley. Down the hill this column came at a rush under the fire of the Turkish gunners, who from amid the dim smoke on Veliki Izvor threw shells thick and fast among them; but the column was under the shelter of a wood, amid the russet and yellow foliage of which it disappeared, until it emerged again to open fire upon the enemy's lines, now almost completely enveloped in smoke, while the roar of rifle-musketry made the welkin ring. But the column which had deployed and advanced so well was repulsed by the Turks, and fell back, disputing every inch of ground; nor could any effort on the part of Pelham, Stanley, and other officers induce the soldiers of it to reform and advance again: for the Servians are but timid men at best.

Over dead and wounded men and horses, over ground torn, furrowed, and cut up by bursting shells and artillery wheels, over gouts of blood and pools of water, the Servians were now falling confusedly back, after terrible losses, when Dochtouroff gave the order for the reserve to advance.

'Up they jumped, without waiting for any second order,' says a British officer in his narrative, 'and ran with great speed, firing off their guns and cheering loudly. There was only one fault to be found with them, and that was that they unfortunately ran and fired in the *wrong* direction! In vain Dochtouroff shouted; in vain he swore, but they only ran the faster. I asked him to allow me to try and compel them, with the aid of my sword and revolver, to halt, front, and charge the enemy. "No, no," said he; "they are not worth wasting powder on. Nothing can stop them, and the day is lost."'

On all sides now were heard the shrieks and half-stifled groans of the wounded, the last sobs of the dying, and piteous entreaties for water or for aid. Faces paled by death and smeared with blood were everywhere; the green grass, the purple violets of autumn that grew wild, like the white cups of the arum lilies, were all splashed and empurpled with the same ghastly tint. The bodies in some places lay across each other in piles, the swarthy, brown-clad Servian soldier and the more swarthy Turk, with his red fez and his shining military buttons, the badge worn by all ranks, from the Sultan to the drummer-boy.

By some mistake the Servian artillery were prematurely ordered to retire, and thus, as the supports had failed, the retreat became general, and by three in the afternoon the action was over; but ere this Cecil had been in one or two cavalry charges to check pursuit, and to do him justice, General Dochtouroff left nothing undone by personal example and by brief harangues in Servian and Russian to prevent the retreat from becoming a headlong rout along the Lukova road.

Outstripping the *Assakiri Mansurei Mohamediyes*, as the regular infantry of the Turkish army boast themselves to be, some of their cavalry came on with wonderful *élan*. At one point Cecil got his squardon to form a front by going threes about, as a corps of Turkish lancers came on, with swords jangling, accoutrements rattling, and their green pennons—the holy colour—streaming straight out over their scarlet fezzes. A sharp, short word of command in Turkish, a sharper note from a trumpet, the lance-points flashed in the air as they came down to the charge, and the horses from a rapid trot rushed on in a wild gallop, and in a moment there was a shock, a crash, and a wild and terrible *mêlée*.

Saddles were emptied, and steeds and riders went down on every side; but Cecil's Servians, despite his fiery example, could make no impression on the Turks. Resolute in aspect, beetle-browed, keen-eyed, and hawk-nosed, they come on with heads stooped in full career, their cries of 'Allah, Allah!' rend-

ing the air; and whenever a Servian, sword in hand, attempted to close, their couched lances bristled against his arm or his horse's breast; so the former pressed on, in an invulnerable line, till Cecil's troopers fairly gave way, and quitted the field on the spur with bridles loose, sweeping him away with them, for Servian courage and Servian honour were sorely tarnished on that day in front of Zaitchar; nor did the cavalry and other fugitives fairly stop till they reached a place called Balgivac, some thirteen miles from the field of battle, where Medvidovski and his staff had halted.

Dispirited and disgusted with the result of the day—not that he had any vital interest in it—but, wet, cold, weary, and exhausted, Cecil flung himself on the bare earth, like nearly all around him, without food or rations of any kind; and thus he was found by Stanley, Pelham, and another English volunteer, who shared his brandy-flask with them all, and they spent the remainder of the night in comparing notes of the past day's heartless work, reviling the Servians, their want of mettle and discipline, and drawing comparisons between them and "our own fellows," that were far from flattering to the troops of His Majesty King Milano Obrenovitch.

CHAPTER LV.

A RIDE FOR LIFE OR DEATH!

CECIL'S troop, which had lost heavily in the encounter with the Turkish lancers, escorted some of the wounded and sick to the camp at Deligrad, passing through a beautiful valley, and skirting the slopes of Mount Urtanj, one of the greatest hills in Servia. The way was of the roughest and steepest kind; his progress was slow, with a convoy of blood-stained, tattered, and dying creatures. It was a march he never forgot, and from one circumstance, perhaps, more than all. He met *en route* the old village pope (or priest) of Palenka, mounted on

one of the shaggy, hardy little ponies, and from him—amid many an exclamation of lamentation, sorrow, and anathema—he learned distinct tidings of the fate of Margarita, and that her remains had been found by some woodcutters at the base of the cliff below the Krall Lazar chapel, and a storm of terrible emotion swelled up in Cecil's heart, as he listened to the broken accents of the priest. Great was his horror and great his pity! He forgot all the vengeance he personally owed Guebhard in this new, unthought-of and more terrible debt, and sadly and touchingly the rare beauty of the dead girl and her devotion to himself came back to memory now!

Full of thought that could take no coherent form in words, he rode on as one in a dream, and almost oblivous now of all around him! of the sufferings of those who formed his miserable convoy; of the dark blood dripping through the straw, from half-dressed wounds, that burst out afresh; of the groans and cries elicited by every jolt of the clumsy ambulance waggons; of the monotonous rumbling of the wheels that shook and jarred against ruts and stones; even of the deaths that were occurring from time to time, leaving the dead and the living side by side, while the forest birds of prey hovered over his sorrowful line of march, and followed it, in anticipation of a banquet.

He thought of Margarita, who, he felt assured, had perished thus awfully through her love for himself, and through the assignation made at the way-side chapel—an assignation of which Guebhard must—by some unaccountable means—have become cognisant; and then he thought of Guebhard, the half-Bulgarian, and sighed in fury through his clenched teeth—'Oh, to be near Guebhard, but for a minute!'

But the latter was nearer *him* than he could well have imagined.

For food and rest, and to have his wounded attended to, and the dead taken from amid the living to a place of interment, he halted at a village which was indicated in his 'route,' on the slope of Mount Mezlanie, just as darkness was closing in, and

through the net work of the forest branches the western sky glowed vivid with lurid light, though darkness had fallen on the valleys far below the mountain slopes, and a busy time he had of it, with a couple of surgeons, a staff of soldier-nurses and orderlies, going from waggon to waggon, and hearing but one reiterated story of suffering, one repeated chorus of cries, moans and often curses.

Seeking the only *cafane* in the place, he dismounted at the door, had a dish of hot *paprikash* and black coffee, dashed well with brandy—of which, as his duty was not yet over, he partook standing, and was in the act of lighting a cigarette, when a man, dressed like a Servian peasant, but marvellously well mounted for such, approached the door, and without quitting his saddle, asked in a low and timid, or somewhat uncertain voice, for some refreshment.

The voice of the stranger gave Cecil a species of electric shock, for 'there is no instinct so rapid and so unerring as the instinct of a foe;' and despite the voluminous dark beard and peasant garb, he recognised the clearly cut features, the hawk-like nose with delicate nostrils, and the black beady eyes of Guebhard!

The voice, the sight, the presence of this man after the awful narrative of the village pope so recently told, and now acting suspiciously as a spy in the interests of the enemy, roused Cecil's blood to fever heat. As a deserter, spy and assassin, this man's life was trebly forfeited, and Cecil left his seat, slowly and deliberately to avoid giving alarm, and feeling in his heart a grim sweetness in the idea that the destroyer of Margarita was to perish by *his* hand!

But, as he moved towards the door of the *cafane*, the light of a lamp fell upon him, and he was instantly recognised by the renegade, who remained in his saddle outside an open window.

Guebhard started violently; a ferocious vindictiveness sparkled in his eyes; his face grew paler with rage and alarm that were evidently mingled with a panther-like desire to rush at Cecil. He ground his teeth; he quivered in every limb;

and then, suddenly seized by a panic of fear, fired three shots from a revolver at Cecil, wheeled round his horse and galloped away.

Every shot went wide of its mark, and another moment saw Cecil in his saddle, in hot pursuit, guided for a time only by the sound of the flying hoofs. Careless of whither he rode, even if right into the Turkish lines, he dashed on, goring his horse with sharp rowels at every bound.

'Halt, dog and scoundrel!—halt, or die!' he cried again and again.

Guebhard was now about a hundred yards ahead, but that distance lessened fast as Cecil tore after him, his pistol levelled twenty times ere he would risk a shot, as there was no time for reloading, and the night-clouds were deepening fast.

They were in full race—pursuer and pursued. Cecil fired two chambers; but both must have missed, as Guebhard neither winced nor fell, but fired at random in return.

'The fiend take him!' was the latter's thought; 'he baulked my night's work once, and slew my Montenegrin comrade, and I have already missed him, shot after shot!'

Without other thought than flight, Guebhard, aware that he was unable to defend himself now that his pistols were empty, and knowing that his personal strength and skill with the sword were inferior to those of Cecil's, spurred wildly on and on, with every respiration tasting all the bitterness of anticipated death in his coward heart, expecting every instant to feel a shot pierce his back like a red-hot bolt and stretch him there to feed the wolves and carrion crows.

Guebhard, perhaps, was not quite a coward by nature; but somehow the panic of an utter poltroon possessed him now. Was it the terrible deed he had done at the chapel of Krall Lazar that unnerved his heart and unstrung his sinews? It must have been so. The last glance he had seen in the eyes of Margarita haunted him; and he thought of that delicate and faultless form lying mangled at the foot of the cliff to become the prey of vultures and wild animals now, when his own end

seemed so terribly close and nigh, at the hands of her avenger —the man he had so often wantonly wronged, and who, he knew, would be pitiless as a famished tiger.

If he had remorse, it was curiously mingled with an emotion of jealous triumph, that to this man Margarita was lost for ever —wrested from him by his hands, as we have said, and that Death alone was her possessor now!

'Coward, rein up!—your sword—your sword to mine!' cried Cecil, more than once; but neither taunt, sneer, nor threat availed him then.

At this time he felt in his heart much of that emotion which a writer calls 'the religion of revenge, which had been sacred to his forefathers, in the age when murderers were proven by bier-right, and for wrong, the Fiery Cross of war was borne alight over moor and mountain.'

Fiercely, high and tumultuously, coursed the blood through his veins. Every muscle was strained, like those of a race-horse in the field, for he had an awful penalty to exact, and Guebhard knew well that he had a terrible debt to pay—one for which not even his life and the last drop of his blood would atone.

Yet Guebhard, perhaps, could not have told whether he most loved or hated the memory of the girl he had destroyed.

He knew that too probably, if steel and lead failed, if once in the grasp of Cecil, the latter would trample him to death, choke him like a viper with a heel upon his throat; and, sooth to say, such was the terrible idea that occurred to the pursuer at times while, with fiery exultation, he found himself gaining upon his prey.

The sweat of a great mortal agony gathered on the temples of Guebhard; his mouth was parched; his breath came short and fast; and, half-turning in his saddle, he could see, in the starlight, the white set face of his pursuer almost within arm's length of him, and the outstretched head of his horse more than once actually in a line with his crupper.

The black beard had fallen off now.

'How,' thought Cecil; 'how came it to pass that this man, so full of the common vulgar terror of mere physical peril, ever turned soldier—even in name!'

He next thought it was fortunate that, owing to the slowness of the past day's march, and the short length of it, his horse was tolerably fresh; but that of Guebhard seemed to be in the same condition.

He recalled the assassin-like attempts on his own life; his being tracked in the forest; well-nigh done to death and buried alive; he recalled the forged document which brought, for a time, dishonour on him and destruction close indeed; but more than all did he think of Margarita, done to death so terribly; and Guebhard thought of all these things as he rode wildly on, and the other as wildly and madly pursued him.

He had wrested her from his enemy, and what he had done he would not have undone even had he the power. Since she would not, and could not, be his, she was lost to the other—dead!—taken by his hand, and yet he feared to die!

Whatever the wretch Guebhard felt when alone was given way to there, in the darkness, to the full. No spectator or chance visitor—none of those with whom he had mingled in the Turkish camp—ever saw a change in the pale, delicate, and immutable face of the destroyer, or could have detected the dread secret his calm, soft smile concealed.

He had always feared, however, that sooner or later retribution would come; that his desertion, if not his other crimes, would find him out, and strike him down in the hour of fancied security, and now—now it seemed that the time of fate had come!

Cecil's last shot had been expended; but as revolver-firing is always dubious, and in certainty every way inferior to the old single or double-barrelled pistol, that shot had only grazed the shoulder of Guebhard, who was next aware that Cecil had drawn his sword, the steel blade of which glittered blue and grim in the starry light!

Where were their horses taking them—towards the Morava, or the valley of the Timok?

Cecil gave no thought to this, nor cared; down steep pathways, jagged with rocks; through orchards more than once; past fields of flax and Indian corn; past walls laden with vines; past houses and farmsteads sunk in darkness and silence; past villages, where pariah dogs barked and howled at them; through woods, where the interwoven foliage was dense above, and the late violets grew thick and fragrant below, and the wild acanthus spread its beautiful leaves.

Anon, down narrow gorges where the arbutus and laurel overhung the way; then thundering along the worn pavement of some old Roman road; now so close that they could hear each other breathing; and anon, a horse's length asunder, as some obstruction—a laurel root, or a vine tendril—gave momentary hopes to the fugitive.

Of the way he went in this night ride for death and life—for retribution and punishment—Cecil had no knowledge and took no heed; he seemed to follow it, as we follow paths in dreams; yet he did so unvaryingly and unswervingly.

At last the darkness became so intense by the thickness of the foliage overhead, in a deep and narrow way, that Cecil failed to make out the figure of the fugitive for a time.

The sound of their own breathing and that of their horses, with the crash of the hoofs, alone broke the stillness of the night—of the world it almost seemed—where all things slept amid the utter tranquillity that had fallen everywhere.

They rushed down steeps, where the loose and perilous stones emitted showers of sparks when struck by the iron hoofs; the necks of their horses were outstretched like those of racers; their flanks heaved, and their bridles and breasts were covered with white foam flecks.

In the gloomy way, under the forest trees, Cecil—we have said—failed to see the figure of him he pursued—but he could hear his horse's hoofs crashing on before him, and he followed the sound. He neared the animal, a grey, closer and closer, as

now its speed seemed to slacken; with a low fierce exclamation, he came abreast of it, only to find the saddle empty, and the rider—gone!

But whether the latter had taken his feet out of the stirrups, caught the branch of a tree and swung himself up into it, or threw himself off amid some thick underwood and crept quietly and safely away, Cecil could not determine. But one fact remained; he saw no more of Guebhard for that night!

His mortification and disappointment at being suddenly baffled thus were extreme; and his disgust was enhanced in no small degree, by the humiliating conviction, that the sooner he was clear of that identical wooded way the better for himself, as he knew not from what tree, or clump of underwood he might, at any moment, be covered by the pistol of Guebhard, lurking in security and unseen.

Where was he now, and how to find his way back to where he had left his convoy of ambulance waggons?

He had noted no land marks—taken no heed of the way he had come. He had seen before him Guebhard, and Guebhard only! He must have ridden many miles—how many he knew not, and now his horse was weary and blown.

Fortunately for him, his orders were to halt at the village he had left for the night, and to begin the next day's march at noon, or as soon after as the wants of the wounded and sick had been attended to; and steering his way chiefly by the stars, he rode slowly on his return, with an irritating sense of annoyance, humiliation and disquietude, as, for all he knew, he might be close in the vicinity of the enemy and fall into their hands.

He rode slowly and warily, and fortune favoured him; about dawn he found himself near the little town of Kragojeratz, on the right bank of the river Lepenitza, a tributary of the Morava, and there his Servian uniform at once procured him a mounted guide to the village he had left, and from which he was then about twenty miles distant.

CHAPTER LVI.

WHAT THE 'TIMES' TOLD.

JADED and weary, Cecil began the homeward march, and strange to say, the effect of the long and revengeful pursuit of Guebhard on his mind was this: that he felt—if not less resentment and hatred against that personage—a desire that when condign punishment befell him, it might come from some other hand than his.

He felt somewhat soothed by a conviction of the abject terror and deep humiliation to which he had subjected Guebhard; yet, ever and anon, the narrative of the village pope gave his heart a pang of positive pain.

Again in Deligrad, to him the scene of so much suffering and unmerited degradation.

'What am I to do now with the remainder of this life that is left to me?' he thought wearily, as he dismounted from his horse, and tossed the bridle reins to his orderly, leaving his painful convoy now to the care of the doctors and nurses, though many were there who were beyond all human care, and would only answer now to the reveille that would be heard in the unknown land.

He gladly sought out the log hut shared by Stanley and Pelham, whose regiment, with many more of the troops lately engaged in the assault on the Turkish lines at Zaitchar, had now come into cantonments. As an abode, the hut was nearly as wretched as any of ours in the Crimea.

The soil of the floor was banked up in the centre and at the sides; the former acting as the site of a fireplace, the latter for two beds. Four upright posts driven into the earth and boarded all round, formed the chimney, and thereon hung swords, revolver cases, field-glasses, flasks, pannikins, etc.

A few boxes, bullock-trunks, and bottles full or empty, formed the furniture, and upon a species of couch improvised from the former and covered by a bear's skin lay Stanley, in half undress,

with a cigar in his mouth. His figure was tall and slight, and it set off the dingy brown uniform, more than the latter set off him. He had the upright military carriage he had won in the Household Brigade; he had still the suppleness of youth, and eyes that had lost none of their fine, clear and honest fire of expression.

He sprang to his feet as Cecil entered and gave him a cheery shout of welcome. Pelham was on duty, but Stanley duly did the honours of their mutual abode, and produced from some mysterious receptacle dishes, glasses, knives, cold ration beef with tomato salad (tomatoes were plentiful in the camp at Deligrad), bread, wine and a box of havannas. He bustled about like a frank jolly Englishman as he was now, and all unlike the *blasé* frequenter of Belgravian ball-rooms he had been, and would yet become again; but while listening to Cecil's exciting account of his race over night, it was evident to the narrator that he had in his face a preoccupied and perplexed expression, though rather a bright one.

'What is up, old fellow?' asked Cecil, who had been observing him narrowly; 'you seem as if you had something on your mind—something cheery too. Are you about to quit this work as not very remunerative?'

'That I shall no doubt do in time, if some Turkish bullet does not knock me on the head,' replied Stanley, as he carefully selected a fresh cigar; 'but I have something in my mind—whether cheery or not, I cannot say; but finish your meal—fill your glass again, and then we'll have a talk about it.'

While Cecil satisfied an appetite the result of much recent exposure and exercise, Stanley produced a worn, frayed and very tattered copy of the *Times*—a copy that was now a month or two old.

'By Jove! when I look upon this paper, "how the old time comes o'er me," as Claud Melnotte says,' exclaimed Stanley; 'and Regent Street, the Row, the clubs with their bow-windows, the parks, the coaching meet, the collar days at Buckingham Palace—the bank guard, pocketing the guinea and punishing

the port, the West End—how London, one and all, with its beauties, comforts and luxuries appear in mental possession, making one long to leave Servia and Servian affairs to the care of the devil; for the lark is over—the game played out; I for one have had enough of it, and home is now the place for me!'

Cecil sighed.

He had no—*home!*

'To what is all this the preface?' he asked.

'To nothing; it is only the expression of my own thoughts; but there is a notice in the *War Office Gazette* here—where the deuce—oh, here it is. I have heard you speak, more than once, quite incidentally, of the Cameronians.'

'Likely enough—I knew some of them—once.'

Cecil winced as he spoke, for Stanley was eyeing him keenly, and then said:

'Look here, old fellow, do you know anything of this—this name—Pelham and I have been puzzling our brains over the announcement.'

Cecil took the paper and gave a violent start, with a half-suppressed exclamation, as he read:

'CAMERONIANS.—The name of the officer, the proceedings of the court-martial on whom were cancelled, and who was re-gazetted to this regiment in last week's *Gazette*, is Captain Cecil Falconer Montgomerie—*not* Captain Cecil Falconer, as formerly.'

'Montgomerie—what *can* this mean!' said Cecil almost involuntarily, and feeling intensely perplexed. He was, beyond all description, startled too, while a great rush of joy and hope mingled in his heart, with the surprise that possessed him. The notice—the cancelled proceedings of the court-martial, and the name evidently referred to himself, but whence came this addition—the surname of Montgomerie?

Stanley was watching him silently. Was all this the clue to

much apparent mental suffering, that Pelham and himself had suspected and seen? Was this the explanation of much in his manner that seemed reserved and curt, when 'the service' was spoken of, though they both suspected shrewdly that he had been in it—was 'an army man?'

'You colour painfully, Cecil, old fellow,' said he, patting him kindly on the shoulder; 'but if this gazette refers to you——'

'It does—it must—but why am I named Montgomerie?' exclaimed Cecil impetuously. 'I have the name of Falconer.'

'You have been in some scrape perhaps—who among us has lived a life without pain, or who among us has been without reproach?'

'I have lived a life—latterly at least—that has had much of pain in it; and if there was any reproach, it was unmerited—all!'

'I can well believe it, and congratulate you heartily,' exclaimed Stanley, clasping his passive hand, while Cecil, still as one in a dream, muttered about the name of 'Montgomerie?'

'By Jove,' said Stanley, as a sudden light broke upon him; 'I remember your affair now, and the noise it made at mess-tables. Well, well—court-martials are not infallible—neither are the Horse Guards authorities, for the matter of that. I remember when we were lying in the Wellington Barracks, how a fellow in the Coldstreams—but have another glass of wine!'

'Oh, Stanley,' said Cecil, in a broken voice, 'you do not know—and never, never may you know—what it is, and has been, to live on day after day, under the cloud that cast a gloom on my life! To bear, with a dull aching of the heart—to exist under a cloud and unexplainable shadow, trying by some brilliant act, hoping by well-done service, to redeem my name in this——'

'Well—in this devil of a country, to which Pelham and I came for a new sensation, in search of a spree, in fact. I know the world, Cecil—it is a cruel world, even to the strong; and the best of us get into scrapes with it.'

'But I got into none—at least, none that I can understand or explain,' replied Cecil, a little incoherently.

'Yet you were—were——'

'Dismissed!'

'Poor fellow—I remember well; and this notice?'

'Refers to me—it must—the sentence of dismissal has been cancelled; though I cannot understand how, or through whom. I thought I had not a friend in the world—save one,' he added, as he thought of Mary.

'How did all this cursed evil come about?'

And Cecil told him all—at least so far as he knew.

'I see it all, as plain as a pikestaff!' exclaimed Stanley, when the latter concluded; 'something has turned up—something new come to light, and they've reinstated you. You were dismissed generally, not specifically, or rendered incapable of serving Her Majesty again; it makes all the difference in the world! Another bumper of wine, to re-wet the old commission!'

Cecil drained the glass like one who was sore athirst, for he was then under considerable mental excitement.

Restored to his rank and to the old Cameronians—the cloud under which he had left the service, and which so nearly broke his heart, dispelled! The proceedings of that most fatal court-martial, which in his dreams had so often haunted him as a nightmare—cancelled, as if they had never been; how had all this come to pass, and who was the guardian angel that had brought it about?

A fever of impatience possessed him. But he could not yet, with honour, quit the Servian army, though he had the power of resigning at any moment. He had no official letter; perhaps the Horse Guards knew not where he was—and letters, if any, for him, might be at the bottom of the Morava, as a mishap had befallen the mail; and more than all, a general action—a great battle, a decisive one for Servia, was confidently believed to be upon the tapis.

Then he would think, if it should be all some mysterious mistake, and this notice referred, by a blunder, to some one else—a mistake, after all—after all! for he had been so long

accustomed to the frowns of Fortune, that he feared she would never smile upon him permanently again.

'By the way, old fellow,' said Stanley suddenly, 'there is a letter for you, in the care of Pelham; it may throw some light on all this.'

'A letter—official?'

'No.'

'A letter—from whom?'

'How should I know?' said Stanley, laughing; 'it is all over postmarks, anyway. The dragoon bringing the mails from Belgrade was shot by some Circassians, and fell into the Morava. Some woodman saved a bag or two, but the letters were nearly destroyed; and here comes Pelham with yours. We only got duns from London tradesmen, and laughed as we lit our pipes with them here.'

CHAPTER LVII.

MARY'S LETTER.

WHETHER he thanked Pelham for what he brought him; how he bade the former and Stanley adieu, and in what terms he did so, Cecil never gave thought to, nor did he remember; he was only aware of one fact, that the letter placed in his hand, crumpled, sodden, spotted with blood of the Servian dragoon, and partly defaced by the water of the Morava, was from Mary —from Mary Montgomerie; and oblivious of all else the world contained, he rushed away, breathlessly, to the solitude of his own tent, to peruse it.

Amid all it had undergone in transmission, the tinted paper on which it was written retained a subtle, but faint perfume. It was dated from Eaglescraig, and nearly a month back, and was sorely defaced and in some parts quite illegible.

A letter from Mary! he had opened it, hastily yet tenderly,

with tremulous fingers—for his hands, that never shook when holding sword or pistol, shook now like aspen twigs, and as he held the paper before him a mist crept over his sight; for he knew that *her* hand had touched the paper and had written the lines that were there.

'My own little Mary!' he murmured; 'on earth I have nothing whereby to be worthy of you—and I have won and retained your love!'

He read on quickly and nervously, only to return to the beginning, and read over and over again; but in some places whole lines had been obliterated.

'My darling, oh my darling!' he read in one place, 'we have traced you at last, and learned from the newspapers that you have escaped some awful peril, the details of which have not yet been made public. Write to us soon, and that you are coming home—write to the general, if you will. Oh, how happy he would be.'

He—what mystery—what change was here!

'And oh! my own Cecil, you . . . . and how can I tell it to you, although I do so with joy, that now we know all—all about the giddiness that seized you at the ball, when talking with me, and how it was caused by Hew—Hew—the infamous and cruel, who, as he has since confessed in writing, when it was supposed he was dying, drugged your wine—unseen by all!'

Cecil paused and started to his feet, and passed a hand across his throbbing forehead.

'Drugged — oh, villain!—villain — vile trickster!' he exclaimed, while tears, hot and salt, came unbidden to his eyes.

'Sir Piers,' continued the letter, 'the general, as he will always have himself called—the dear old thing!—went straight to the Horse Guards about it, and saw the commander-in-chief personally. You know his position, services, and influence; and so, dearest Cecil, you are again . . . . '

'In the old corps,' said Cecil, as the letter here was again

illegible, 'as the *Gazette* shows—Falconer—Montgomerie—why, and under which name is the remainder of my life to be passed?'

A whole paragraph followed, so sorely defaced that, with all his intense anxiety, Cecil could make nothing of it; and yet his future life might hinge on all that paragraph contained or detailed. But he failed to decipher it, save a word or two here and there—among them the names of 'father—mother—cousin—my own cousin,' and old John Balderstone was again and again referred to, in connection with some mysterious letters and documents he had found in some mysterious way to all appearance, and the whole bewildering passage concluded thus:

'Sir Piers deplores in his inmost heart his harsh treatment of you and your poor parents.' ('My parents!') 'And craves earnestly that you will return to your home—to Eaglescraig, and to *me*, dearest Cecil. He is telling me a long story about India, and letters going by *dawk* (whatever that may be) as I write, thus I scarcely know what I am putting upon paper .... Oh, how we all miss you, Cecil—I more than all; but you will soon be coming back to us now, thank God! Long and drearily pass the days—the mornings and evenings now at Eaglescraig; and I can but think of you, so blighted apparently in life, so lost to your own world, so ruined and so far away from me, in a land of peril. I write this to you on the merest chance, and in the prayerful hope that it may reach you; as we only learned your present terrible whereabouts from a newspaper paragraph.

'In Servia! oh, my love! what took you to such an unheard-of place as Servia? .... I never open the piano now; I dare not trust myself to sing.'

The sight of her writing sent ever and anon a thrill to his heart, even as a touch of her gentle and delicate hand would have done.

'You will be delighted to learn that the quarrel or estrangement between your friend Leslie Fotheringhame and my dear

Annabelle has all been explained away, and they are to be married in two months; but in the meantime Leslie has resolved . . . . and to please me . . . . in Servia. Ah, dearest Cecil, I thought such strange things only occurred in novels and melo-dramas as are occurring now to us! Only think of . . . .'

'Such strange things; to what does she refer? More obliteration!' sighed Cecil.

And now the letter ended, as such documents usually do, with many of the sweet, if childish, endearing terms so appreciated by lovers, and of which they never weary, as they are meant for their eyes alone.

How often Cecil read it, kissed it, and strove to fill up and draw deductions from the fragmentary passages, we shall not pretend to say; but great food was given to him for speculation and marvel.

What was this miraculous discovery of John Balderstone? What event had produced such a beneficial effect upon everyone, on the general and himself in particular? How had it turned the heart of the general to him, and to 'his parents,' the ill-treatment of whom he deplored?

That the general, a soldier and man of the highest honour, smarting under a sense of Hew Montgomerie's treachery to an innocent man, had done as he had, by putting himself instantly in communication with the military authorities, and procuring his restoration, as the victim of a conspirator, Cecil could readily understand and be profoundly grateful for; but beyond that, all Mary's letter was to him—chaos!

Mental questions occurred to him in tiresome iteration.

In the fever of his impatience and doubts of all he wished elucidated, he drank some wine, but it seemed destitute of strength and coolness; he tasted some grapes, and they failed to moisten his tongue; he lighted a choice cigar, but its soothing influence was gone.

Mary's letter, delicious though it was to receive, meant much

more than he could extract from it. What was all this new mystery of which he had so suddenly become the centre? Would she write again—and when?

He must write to her; but where might she be at that precise time? At Eaglescraig, without doubt. Their love was one that had made them cleave unto each other in the teeth of all adverse circumstances, and hope naturally began to brighten anew in Cecil's heart, as he turned alternately from the puzzling notice in the *Gazette* to Mary's equally puzzling letter.

'Patience,' he would mutter; 'patience, and in a little time all will be made clear.'

But nevertheless he grew more impatient than ever.

How much of caressing tenderness, as well as information of importance, had been obliterated in Mary's letter by the envious water of the Morava! When would he obtain a key, a clue to it all?

The soft, bright dreams that are so frequent in our earlier years, and form a part of our existence then, and which as time goes on become greyer, duller, and farther apart, and less tinted with sunshine, were coming back to Cecil's heart again, as he sat in his tent alone, and striving to think it all out—the new mystery that enveloped him.

He lost no time in writing to her in reply, a long and passionate letter; all the longer and more passionate that he had heard nothing of her for such a length of time, and had all the pent-up emotion of his heart to pour forth. Though he knew not what was meant by the discoveries to which she referred, he tendered through her all his thanks to the general for his kindness, and, in the exuberance of his joy, felt that he could even forgive Hew for the malice he had displayed and the terrible wrong he had done him. Home! he would start for home the moment he could hear from her again, or get some details, some official letter of instructions, on the subject that perplexed him; and he deplored that as matters stood he could not just then, with honour, quit the army of the Morava. *Why*,

he did not tell her—that the thunderclouds of a great battle were soon to darken the air around Deligrad!

The rumour spread rapidly, with many exaggerations, that the 'Herr Capitan' in Tchernaieff's Own Dragoons was an officer in the British army, and it greatly enhanced the importance with which Cecil was viewed in the Servian camp.

If, ere he could leave that arena with honour, he was doomed to fall in battle now, it seemed to him hard to have to quit life so suddenly, when it became full of new value, and seemed more worth living!

Often had he reflected that he had not yet seen his thirtieth year, and that all the maturity of life spread out before him, and he felt that he had the spirit, energy, and courage to carve out name and fame for himself; but were either to be won in the heartless struggle between Servia and Turkey? He had always feared not; and now, with a bright, glorious, and triumphant revulsion of feeling, he felt it mattered not. He had now a name and career elsewhere!

'I like this young fellow Falconer immensely,' said Stanley to Pelham, as they talked over his affairs after he left them; 'but I wish him well out of this camp and country too, especially if he has new and brighter prospects at home.'

'Well,' replied Pelham, who, like Stanley, was a handsome fellow, with much of that easy but indescribable air and manner of a man who had seen all the world of life has to show, 'he has been down on his luck—got court-martialled, it seems, in some row, and is now reinstated in his regiment and rank—squared it with the F.M. at the Horse Guards and all that.'

'With a girl he loved also—an heiress I expect; and yet he is going in for the last of this campaign.'

'What of that—why shouldn't he see the end of the fun?'

'What of it? This much! won't it be strange—very strange—if Count Palenka's weird prediction comes true, and the poor fellow gets bowled out after all?'

'By Jove! I never thought of that. What a fellow you

are! But I don't believe in predictions of gipsies, jugglers, and things, don't you know.'

But there was much in the memory and the time—the memory of the count's dark grave face, his manner and expression—that impressed even the thoughtless Stanley; so he dropped the subject and smoked on in silence.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE HEIGHTS OF DJUNIS.

IT was the morning of the 20th of October, and the bells of St. Nestor's Monastery were just tolling for matins, when the deep hoarse boom of the Turkish Krupp guns announced their attack upon Djunis, the key of the Servian position, some almost impregnable heights overlooking Deligrad and the valley of the Morava.

It was a wild and gusty morning. The chill breeze was sweeping fiercely through the groves and woodlands, casting their dark and fitful shadows in the morning sunshine on the ground beneath. There the dead leaves were whirled in clouds to and fro, and the green blades of the dewy and yet untrodden grass shone like steel or silver in the sheen of the level sun.

Long ere this, the Servian and Russian troops—three thousand of the latter had joined only two months before—were under arms, and all moving into the various positions assigned to them; and the sombre columns, in the brown uniforms of Milano, or the dusky grey capotes of the Emperor, were marching in masses up the steeps and along the slopes, with their bayonets and accoutrements flashing incessantly in the sun, deploying, deepening, and extending, anon reducing their front as some natural obstruction came in the way, to deploy in front formation again, the tricolours waving in the wind, while occasionally the clear blast of a bugle was borne past on it.

Cecil's regiment, formed by squadrons of which he com-

manded the leading one, had all the cloaks rolled and strapped to the pommel of the saddles. Baggage, valises, and all that might impede the men in action, were left in camp, and the edge and point of the sword alone were looked to for the work of the day, which was chiefly to support a battery of guns and go wherever they were wanted.

'My God, I thank Thee!' thought Cecil, with high and pure enthusiasm in his heart, as he leaped on his horse that morning; 'to-day, whatever may happen—whatever fate may befall me—I am again a Cameronian, a Queen's officer, one of the true old Cameronians who in every fight, from the days of Dunkeld to the fall of Magdala, have carried their colours with honour, and given place to none!'

And so he felt that it was as much in the character of a British officer, as one in the service of Milano Obrenovitch, he drew his sword in what was eventually to prove the last battle of the Servian war.

The cavalry brigade to which he belonged moved off by fours from the right of squadrons.

'*Shagoum-marche!* trot—*à levo!—nà préte!*' (left wheel—forward!) followed, and the column began to descend the Krusevac road, moving to the left across a valley.

Here he passed the infantry corps of Pelham and Stanley, halted temporarily.

'A cigar, Falconer,' said the former, holding out his case.

'Thanks—acceptable indeed in this chill atmosphere.'

'If I get knocked on the head to-day—' began Pelham, who was rather a reckless fellow.

'A cheerful beginning!' said Stanley sharply; 'I wish you would shut up, old man. But well, suppose you were so?'

'My tragic fate would be mourned sincerely, at least by many a sorrowful West-end trader, in whose books my later annals have been noted. But, ta, ta, Falconer—there goes our bugle. Advance!'

Shot dead by a Snider bullet in his heart, poor Pelham, within an hour after this, lay cold and stiff on the slope of the

Djunis, while his regiment took up its position in front of the fast-advancing Turkish lines.

With the three days' fighting that now ensued we shall not trouble the reader, further than with that portion which cannot be omitted—the part that Cecil saw, and that he bore in it, with what befell him there.

Though Tchernaieff, on this day, placed the management of the troops chiefly in the hands of General Dochtouroff, he seemed to be ubiquitous, and was seen everywhere in rapid succession all over the Servian position, assisting in the placing of brigades here and there, on the most advantageous ground, and, as an officer who was present has recorded, 'he placed the troops exactly where they were most needed, for the Turks made their attack upon the very positions he had fixed upon.'

'Good-morning, Herr Capitan,' said he, as he passed Cecil's squadron, which had halted near some glassy steeps most difficult of ascent, in rear of the Servian position; 'but it seems to me that the enemy has got very correct information about all the points of our ground.'

'They have evidently been furnished with a plan, excellency,' remarked a Russian aide-de-camp, whose breast was covered with Crimean and Khivan medals.

'A plan!' exclaimed Cecil; 'how can they have got it?'

'How, but through the agency of that scoundrel Guebhard, the renegade!' replied Tchernaieff, with a dark frown, and a Tartar-like gleam in his eyes; 'but the seven gates of hell are always open, and if he is under fire, he may reach one of them to-night!'

'If not?'

'And if he ever falls into my hands, it will be an eye for an eye—a tooth for a tooth—his wretched life against the many lives lost to-day!'

He galloped on; the battle had begun in earnest now; fire and smoke enveloped the whole position that towered skyward; the booming of the heavy Krupp guns and the roar of rifle-musketry loaded the air, and amid it all the Grim Sergeant

was calling fast his ghastly roll, while Cecil sat inactive, impatient in his saddle, and longing to see some work cut out for the cavalry.

Wounded Servians and Russians came pouring past from the heights, smeared with blood and dust—the bronzed and battle-hardened veterans of old wars and the lad newly enrolled but a week before; some were binding up their wounds as they limped past, and some fell on the way, and lay there prone, dead or in a swoon, unheeded and untended—a painful spectacle to look upon in cold blood.

So closely was the attack of the position pressed, and so mixed up did the batteries of artillery and the brigades seem, that amid the sulphurous cloud that enveloped them it was difficult to know, sometimes, which were Servian and which were Turkish.

All day long around the steeps of the Djunis the cannon boomed and the rattle of musketry continued, and great was the slaughter everywhere. Whatever might have been the shortcomings of the Servians in previous battles, all fought well and nobly then, and the din of battle all the livelong day rang between the peaks of the wooded mountains, with a thousand hollow reverberations, drowning every sound elicited by human enthusiasm, valour, suffering, or the heavy hand of coming death.

The smoke seemed to mingle with the clouds, especially towards sunset, where westward, beyond the mountain-tops, a red and tempestuous sun was setting, filling all the vast expanse with intense ruddy light, that threw up intervening objects in opaque and distinct outline.

On many a face that had been bright with youth and health in the morning the sunset fell now, and left it cold, white, and lifeless; the dusk drew on, and still the terrible work of slaughter went forward without ceasing.

As it deepened into utter gloom, the red streaky, and incessant flashes from hundreds of cannon burst forth incessantly; the infantry sought each other's whereabouts by their mutual firing, pouring it in almost at random, while on one

side ever and anon burst forth the deep, hoarse 'Hurrah!' of the Muscovite and Slav, on the other the incessant and shrill high shout of 'Allah, Allah, hu!' till, as if by mutual consent, the contest ceased, and both armies lay down, weary and worn, to endure hunger, thirst, and cold, on the ground where they had fought, and surrounded by all the agony and horrors of their mutual carnage.

Many lay down on that night on the slopes of the Djunis who never rose again.

Cecil passed it rolled in his cloak beside his charger, with a stone for his pillow; but sleep was a stranger to his eyes, and amid the incessant cries and moans of the wounded, who streamed past rearward by twos, threes, or even scores at a time, he strove to think of Mary's letter and all it suggested, to render him oblivious, for a time, of all his terrible surroundings.

A sergeant of his troop shared with him the contents of a flask of *raki*, fiery stuff, but very acceptable under the circumstances, for Cecil was as great a favourite with his Servian troopers as he had been with the Cameronians; and the act of the sergeant—whilom a poor copper-miner in the mountains—recalled to his memory the faith and generosity of his old Cameronian servant, Tommy Atkins, on the last night he was under the same roof with the dear old regiment.

Cecil knew not how the fight had gone on the summit of the position, but when morning dawned, among those who were still straggling, crawling, and limping down from it came a man in a scarlet tunic. Scarlet! The sight of the familiar colour made Cecil's heart leap. The wearer, who was severely wounded, proved to be a new aide-de-camp of Tchernaieff's, a lieutenant of the 1st Hussars of the Russian Imperial Guard, whose uniform is like the British.

He informed Cecil that a portion of the position, named the Crevet Plateau, which Dochtouroff had retaken from the Turks, had afterwards fallen again into the hands of the enemy; but he had sworn to retake it or die there, and after a terrible con-

flict, in which men perished by companies around him, he had failed to do so, though his troops had got into that state of rage or frenzy which the French term *acharnement.*

With dawn the work of death began again, and Cecil's troop, with some other cavalry, began, by a circuitous route, to ascend the position. Ere long shot began to fall and shells to burst among them, scattering wounds, suffering, and death; but so much were the whole heights involved in smoke that he could see little of what was going on, and knew less of the great game that was being played, though the hill on which he was ordered to halt commanded a view of the valleys on both sides.

A regiment of Russian infantry, far away on the right, held with resolute bravery a post assigned it by Dochtouroff, and the Turkish masses with their scarlet fezzes and green standards, and their incessant shout of 'Allah!' seemed to hurl their fury against it again and again in vain. On the left the smoke from three villages, set on fire by them, rolled along the valley and veiled everything. In one part of the field a Russian regiment, which had expended the last of its cartridges, deliberately 'stood at ease' under the Turkish fire, perishing where it was posted, rather than lose honour by falling back!

Thick lay the dead and thicker the wounded on every hand, and the medley of sounds that went up from the Crevet Plateau and the eminences around it was appalling; and the evening of the second day was drawing on.

Suddenly General Dochtouroff, pale and excited, but with flashing eyes, dashed up to where Cecil was at the head of his squadron, and sharply reining in his horse on the curb, said:

'A brigade of guns is getting into position to attack the flank of yonder Turkish column on the left. At the hazard of your life you will support these guns!'

Dochtouroff then galloped away, and, as it proved eventually, Cecil never saw him again.

'Here come the artillery!' cried a voice, as the guns came thundering to the front—all Russian, painted green, guns and carriages alike. Along the slope of the Djunis heights the

brigade came in column at full speed, withdrawn from some other position to act with effect at the point indicated. Crushing many a dead body, and splashing through pools of blood, they went in wild career, the drivers using whip and spur with a will; the fence of a flax-field was swept away like a gossamer web, as the guns rushed to the front—six horses to each gun and limber, three riders to each gun.

Over vineyard walls, fallen trees, through laurel bushes, every horse straining at the gallop, every driver lashing his team and goring with the spurs, while yelling, 'Dobro! dobro! hurrah! hurrah!' they made a wonderfully impressive sight.

Sometimes the guns bounded up eighteen inches or more, as the iron-bound wheels went over some rock or obstruction, but no man lost his seat, and no horse failed in its pace—eight guns, eight tumbrils, eighty horses, and a hundred men, all rushing on for life and death to obey Dochtouroff, and get into position, the cavalry galloping in their rear, and from a column of march right in front, as they wheeled up into line, they formed to the left.

The guns were slewed round with their muzzles to the enemy's line, the limbers were cast off, drawn rearward, and in hoarse Russian the word was given to fire. 'Boom, boom, boom!' rang along the front, shrouding all in smoke, and making terrible havoc in the ranks of the Turkish brigade; but still went up the cry of 'Allah, Allah,' hu!' the concluding words of the Muezzin's call to prayer.

The guns were not charged with shot, but short-fuse shell, and the roar of each explosion veiled for a moment all the other sounds of battle. The explosions were awful, and fast fell the fezzes to earth, the corpses so mangled as to be scarcely recognised as human; yet the brave Turks, incited by their officers, full of military and religious ardour, seeing, perhaps, the glories of Paradise opening before them and the dark-eyed girls waving their scarfs of green, closed nobly in, and were making a forward movement as if to charge the guns, still shouting, 'Allah, Allah, hu!' And now came the time for Cecil

to go to work, to get clear of the brigade of cannon, and form in front to charge, while the latter were reloaded; and even after all he had undergone there now boiled up in his heart the 'rapture of the strife,' as Attila is said to have termed the fierce excitement of battle.

'By half troops to the right turn—left wheel—forward—trot!' were his orders.

'By half troops left wheel—form squadron!' he cried, raising himself in his stirrups and brandishing his sword; 'forward—*gallop*—CHARGE!'

By this time, the Turkish infantry were confusedly endeavouring to form square over the piles of dead and dying who had fallen before the cannon.

Ere the final word had left his lips, Cecil had seen that his squadron had advanced at a brisk trot to within fifty yards of the enemy's front—that there was no closing and crowding of his files to impede the free action of man and horse, and that the former kept the latter well in hand, pressing forward by leg and spur when necessary; and in splendid order, ere the square was formed, with the force of a locomotive, the troopers were sword in hand among them, hewing them down on right and left, the hurrahs of the Servians mingling with the yells of the Turks.

'Fours about!' sounded the shrill trumpet, and away wheeling off to the right and left, while the Turks were still struggling to form square, he left the guns uncovered, and once more the plunging fire—grape and canister this time—went with serpent-like hiss through the swaying mass—tearing off legs, arms, and heads, laying the dead and the dying in swathes above each other.

As he again formed his squadron, breathless now, in rear of the guns, Cecil could see through the whirling and eddying smoke that it was no longer a line, but a mob of men who were in front—a mob whose shrieks, screams, and shouts rent the evening air, while the muskets and bayonets seemed to sway helplessly to and fro.

Another round of these terrible guns from right to left, given with such force and rapidity that the hot guns almost leaped from the ground with the concussion, and the Turks in that quarter gave way *en masse*, just as the fiery sun went down beyond the dark mountain ranges.

Again Cecil led on his troopers, who had been straining like greyhounds in the leash—on over the ground, an acre and more of which was covered by men mutilated in every way—corpses struck by four, five, six bullets—yea, in some instances by a whole charge of canister—and where every blade of grass was dyed red—on to the charge once more, and, as there was no time to take prisoners, a terrible havoc was made—a havoc at which his heart, even in the thrill of what he thought was victory, began to sicken; but he had received his orders to support the guns, and nobly had he done so.

At that point the strife was nearly over, when a cry of agony escaped the lips of Cecil, as a bullet—the last shot of some wounded man—pierced his chest like a red-hot sword-blade, and he fell forward on the neck of his horse, clutching wildly at the reins the while; at the same moment another Turk who lay wounded—an officer apparently—by one slash of his sharp Damascus sabre, all but disembowelled the animal, which uttered a snorting cry, and wheeling round, quitted the field at a mad and infuriated gallop, with his helpless rider clinging to the pommel of the saddle. No one could stop or intercept its headlong career, and in less that a minute the luckless commander vanished from the eyes of his squadron!

Was Palenka's prediction about to come true after all?

Cecil thought the field was won, yet it was not entirely so. Had the winning thereof depended on the fiery valour of one man, Dochtouroff had been victor. At the head of two hundred Russians he charged with the bayonet right into the centre of the Turkish main attack, with such fury that ere the rifles crossed the enemy wheeled about and fled, and he saved the principal position—that of Djunis; 'but Krupp guns, Snider

rifles, and better trained troops, in far superior numbers, had done their work, and Servia was beaten!'

During the three days' fighting, the latter lost not less than nine thousand soldiers, in killed, wounded, and missing; and of three thousand Russians who were in the field, only seven hundred remained untouched at sunset on the third day.

The losses of the Turks were never precisely known, but they must have been terrible, as they were the attacking force, and had assailed well-chosen positions that were deemed impregnable.

In Russia and abroad, bluff old Tchernaieff was blamed for recklessness in his tactics, and doubtless he made mistakes which ended in failures. 'And then,' says Captain Salusbury, in his work on those wars, 'it must not be forgotten that he always expected reinforcements which never came. And again it is to be noted that he had to operate with eighty thousand of not the very best troops in a country that required, to command success, two hundred thousand well trained and thoroughly disciplined soldiers. There is no doubt that the men I saw under fire were a far inferior lot to those who fought in the early part of the war.'

When the battle—the last of the strife—was fairly over, a requiem for the dead was solemnly held, according to the Russian ritual, in a tent upon the field, where numbers of ladies, the wives—and in too many sorrowful instances the widows—of Russian officers were gliding about like angels of mercy, ministering to the wants of the wounded. While leaving Dochtouroff to hold the position, Tchernaieff withdrew to the camp at Deligrad.

Meanwhile where was Cecil Falconer, or Montgomerie, as he had been learning to call himself now?

CHAPTER LIX.

WOUNDED.

Away rearward from the field, out of all range of musketry and cannon, Cecil's maddened horse—maddened by the agony of a mighty wound—swept at a furious rate, while he—blinded with equal agony and unable to guide or control it—clung to his holsters or the pommel of the saddle, as it bore him on he knew not whither; but it rushed in its wild career down a wooded valley, actually treading on its own entrails by the way, till it fell heavily with its rider in the depth of a coppice, and there both lay, to all appearance, dying, unseen by mortal eyes.

Down sank the sun beyond those mountains which are spurs of the Balkans, a globe of fiery flame in an angry and cloudy sky; the day was done, and with it many a human life!

Cecil fainted soon after being thrown from his horse, but ere he did so there came over him a strange dreamy wonder of how the battle was progressing, or rather how the tide of war was going, for in the distance he could still hear the cannon on the heights of Djunis.

Anon the din of the battle passed away, and on his partially recovering consciousness the stillness of death surrounded the place where Cecil lay helpless beside his dead horse—a stillness broken only by the voice of the *vila*, or when the damp dewy wings of the night-birds brushed his cheek when whirring past him.

The snow-clad summits of the lofty hills that overlook the valley of the Morava on one side, and that of the Timok on the other, shone pale and white in the light of the uprisen moon.

At times, not far from him, he could hear the snort of a wild boar or the cry of a wolf, scared by the recent din of battle perhaps; and now he became conscious of the rush of a moun-

tain runnel that ran near him, but which, sorely athirst though he was, loss of blood had rendered him too feeble to reach.

Close by him, with holsters, housing and gilded martingale, lay the dead body of his caparisoned horse, the blood of which was freely mingled with his own.

The hours of the night passed slowly on. The moon waned; but the stars grew brighter. Tender thoughts of Mary and all their mutual past, and of the future which now too probably would never be, came to him at times; and in imagination he more than once thought that her voice—but curiously mingled with that of Margarita—came to his almost death-drowsy ear.

Cold and clammy fell the dew of night on his white and upturned face; his breathing was long, deep, and laboured, for the ball that so nearly finished him had deeply pierced his breast. He lay well-nigh lifeless. Would he ever be found—on the farthest skirts of the field as he was—till too late; till death had come first and claimed his own, ere the birds of the air, the wolves and wild dogs made a banquet of him?

The moaning of the night-wind in the giant pines was heard at times; but it brought no sound, save the snarling voices of the beasts of prey, busy perhaps elsewhere. The flow from his wound had stopped; he must have perished otherwise; a species of bloody paste had sealed up the wound for a time; but Cecil's mind had become a chaos now, and he could remember nothing but the agony in his chest and the intensity of his thirst—an intensity to which the murmur of the cool runnel close by added tantalisation.

Would a cooling draught ever moisten his lips again? Even the heavily falling dew had failed to do so.

At last he became alive to all the dire realities of the situation—that he was lying in a lonely and untrodden spot, done nigh unto death; far from aid or succour, unable even to drive away the insects that, when morning came, would be battening in his blood, and when his sole watcher would be the greedy and expectant carrion crow. It would be so. He would die

in solitude, and never find a grave until even that might be found when too late!

Around him, at times, the solitude was awful.

He must have slept or been senseless, for after a certain space he found the sun shining above the tree-tops, and some of the ravenous kites, that were croaking and wheeling above him in circles, had already begun to settle on the body of his horse, and dig their sharp beaks into it—something of life and volition in his face alone preventing them from assailing him, though they eyed him greedily, viciously, and askance from time to time.

A cry of great horror escaped him. Then his wound burst forth afresh, and he became completely senseless and oblivious of all round him.

After all—after all he had undergone, was he at last to find an unknown grave under the eternal shadow of this vast Servian forest!

As the third day of the battle was drawing to a close, an enterprising Briton, well mounted and armed with holster-pistols at his saddle, was galloping with headlong speed along the road that led from the north towards the camp at Deligrad; but evening fell ere he reached the scene of operations, and only in time to see the last red flashes of the loud artillery pale out in the darkness on the lofty heights of Djunis.

The heavy odour of gunpowder pervaded all the air, and every yard of the way now was encumbered by wounded men.

'I thought to have seen some of the sport,' muttered the horseman, who was a well-built soldier-like fellow, with a heavy moustache, and though clad in a coarse and warm tweed suit, wore a handsome Indian helmet secured by a gilt chain under his firm and resolute-looking chin; 'and now I have only arrived in time to be in at the death—the death of thousands, no doubt!' he added with a sigh; 'I wonder which way the day has gone, and who has won—Slav or Turk—not that it

matters very much to me. A three-days' battle! Pray God that *he* may have escaped in them!'

In the moonlight he reached the entrance to the camp at Deligrad; but there, and over all the ground that lay between it and the two wayside hospitals above which the white flags with red crosses were always flying, there were crowds of wounded and dying men, whose moans, cries, and supplications loaded the air, and made the heart of the stranger sicken.

At the entrance to the camp the word *Stoe!* (halt!) was shouted in his ear, and he was stopped by the guard which was under arms, and allowing only ambulance waggons and men in uniform to pass—and the stranger had neither the parole nor countersign.

'Are you in the service of Prince Milano?' asked the officer commanding, in French.

'No.'

'You are a traveller, then?'

'Yes—monsieur—every man travels, nowadays,' replied the other, tossing away his cigar. He then inquired anxiously for the head-quarters or whereabouts of General Tchernaieff and his staff; but no one could say whether the gallant old Muscovite had or had not yet left the heights of Djunis.

'Have you come from Belgrade?' asked the Servian officer, raising his voice, for the number and cries of the wounded were increasing every moment.

'Yes—monsieur—on the spur.'

'Then, perhaps you have despatches from the King?'

'What king?'

'The devil! here is a fellow who never heard of the King of Servia—Milano Obrenovitch!'

'A spy!' said several voices, in Servian and German.

'Spy, be hanged!' exclaimed the stranger.

'We have taken one already, and hanged he shall be on the morrow — the rascal Guebhard!' said the Servian captain exultingly.

'I know nothing about all this—I have my passports, which

show that I am an officer in her Britannic Majesty's service.'

'Bravo! can I serve you?' asked a wounded officer, who was limping past, supported by a soldier.

'Thank God, here is a fellow who speaks English!' exclaimed the stranger to Stanley, for the wounded man was the latter, come down from the heights with a ball in his leg.

'And you wish to see the general?'

'I wish rather to see one who is, or was, on his staff—Cecil Falconer, a brother officer of mine. Allow me to introduce myself—Captain Fotheringhame, of the 26th Foot!'

For he it was—brave, honest, and friendly Leslie Fotheringhame, who had obtained leave, and come all the way to Servia in search of his absent comrade.

'Ah—the old Cameronians!' said the other, as they shook hands. 'I am Captain Stanley, late Foot Guards, and now, for my sins, Major of the 5th Servians. I know Falconer well. He was with the cavalry that went forward to support a brigade of guns. Since noon, I have seen and heard nothing of him — sorry to say so. I am enduring agony with my wound. We have had a terrible day of it. I came here in search of a new sensation; and, by Jove, I have got it—this ball in my leg! The carnage has been great—and I doubt if poor Falconer has escaped—all the more that—that——'

Stanley paused, and hesitated.

'What?'

'His death was curiously predicted.'

'Predicted!' repeated Fotheringhame, in a tone of incredulous surprise; 'by whom?'

'A brother aide-de-camp—an officer of rank.'

'The deuce—do you, an Englishman, think such things possible?'

'When you have been a few months in Servia you will think any devilry possible,' replied Stanley, with a grimace as his wound stung him; 'I wish you every success in your inquiries for Falconer, and I shall be glad to hear of them

from yourself at my hut in the lines. Make your inquiries where the cavalry charged on the right front of the position, and—till we meet again—good-bye.'

And with his head reclining on the shoulder of the Servian soldier who supported him, Stanley, who was evidently in great pain, limped away, while Fotheringhame, knowing not exactly what to think of all this—for, though he might have scouted any predictions at another time, he could not fail to be impressed with doubt and dread, from the terrible sights and sounds on every hand—took his way towards the part of the field indicated by Stanley, walking his horse onward, and upward, from the camp at haphazard in the darkness of a now moonless night.

We need neither refer to fully, nor attempt to describe, the endless scenes of horror that met the eye of Leslie Fotheringhame, as he stumbled on vaguely over the starlit field of battle—the arena of the three-days' conflict round the fatal heights of Djunis—scenes which redoubled in their harrowing intensity as the cold grey dawn stole in over the faces of the dead and the dying.

By industriously prosecuting his inquiries among the wounded and the men of the ambulance corps who were conveying them, he discovered the exact ground where the brigade of guns had gone into action, and Cecil's squadron had charged. The brown uniforms of 'Tchernaieff's Own' were lying there thick, but thicker lay the awful heaps of the Osmanlies, whom the fuse-shells, grape, and canister had mowed down as a scythe mows the grass.

From a sergeant of Cecil's regiment—a sergeant who spoke German, and was the same good fellow who had shared with him the flask of *raki* on the night before the battle—he learned how his friend had been wounded, as well as his horse, and how the latter had borne him out of the field, and been lost to sight in the ravine that opened away deep down on the rear of the right flank.

The prediction spoken of by Stanley seemed terribly near

verification now, as Fotheringhame searched all the woody ravine, with his heart heavy as lead, for he remembered the farewell messages of Mary Montgomerie, and how, when he left her, the kisses of intense gratitude she bestowed on his cheeks were scarcely less tender than those of his own Annabelle.

He searched all the valley, but beneath the deep shadow of the pines, and amid all the wild undergrowth of years, he could see no sign of man or horse—only some croaking kites wheeling lazily in circles—and he turned away, thinking that it was among the blood-splashed wards of the hospitals and ambulance tents, or by the pits where the dead were to be interred, his sorrowful search could only be prosecuted now.

CHAPTER LX.

SAVED!

We have said that when the kites began to assail his dead horse close by him, a cry of great horror escaped the lips of Cecil. Feeble though it was, it reached the ears of Leslie Fotheringhame, just as the latter was in the act of turning, sadly, to leave the wooded hollow.

Moving his horse round a clump of wild laurel bushes, he saw a caparisoned charger lying dead, and near it a man in uniform, to all appearance dead also—he lay so motionless and still.

Fotheringhame drew near. In the strange brown Servian uniform, with his face pale as death could have made it, and obscured by blood and mud, Leslie Fotheringhame had some difficulty in recognising the young friend he had come so far to find—in knowing again the once happy and merry face that, in times past, had been so often opposite his own at the jovial mess-table; but when he did so, a half-smothered ejaculation

escaped him, and a great joy, mingled with greater pity, gushed up in his breast, as he leaped from his horse and knelt beside him.

Cecil's eyes were sightless now, and, though half-closed, fixed glassily on vacancy.

'Cecil—Cecil Falconer!' exclaimed Fotheringhame, as he took in his the cold and passive hand; but the sufferer heard him not. 'Life yet, thank God!' he added, as he felt Cecil's pulse, and then his heart, but withdrew his fingers covered with blood.

Folding the broad leaf of an acanthus into the form of a cup, he brought therein some cool water from the adjacent runnel, and Cecil drank thirstily again and again; and then his head sank back, with the eyes still unclosed, yet sightless—seeing nothing and recognising nothing.

Fotheringhame took a flask of brandy from one of his holsters, and poured some, with water, between the lips of Cecil, whose head he pillowed on his arm.

Partially restored by this, after a time the sufferer attempted to speak; but his utterances were unintelligible, and his head sank lower: his eyes closed now, and his thoughts were wandering—wandering away to Mary, and to the old regiment in feverish dreams—dreams, perhaps, suggested by the voice of Fotheringhame.

The latter found that the wound in the chest was deep, for there the ball had lodged, and not a moment was to be lost in having it attended to. Galloping up to the plateau, he soon procured some of the ambulance corps; a stretcher was improvised by a blanket and a couple of muskets, and Cecil was speedily placed in one of the waggons for conveyance to the camp at Deligrad; but so great was his agony, that the vehicle had to be stopped from time to time, and the contents of Fotheringhame's flask, by giving him artificial strength, alone prevented him from fainting.

Yet strange visions haunted him. Out of the gathering mists of death, as he deemed them, he thought he saw the face

and heard the voice of his old friend and comrade; and with them the voice of Margarita, singing the sweet soft song of 'The Wishes.'

Once he seemed to see distinctly the face of Fotheringhame, and his eyes dilated with something of wonder and alarm in them. Then he closed them, muttering, 'Another dream,' believing it was an unreality.

And now, as the ambulance waggon reached the road that led from the camp to Deligrad, in the open ground Fotheringhame saw some thousand troops, horse, foot, and artillery, massed in columns, forming three sides of a hollow square, and his soldier-eye examined critically the brown ranks of the Servians, and then those in Russian green, as the bayonets were fixed, and flashed in the morning sun when the arms were shouldered.

The fourth or open side of the square was occupied by preparations for an execution, for there stood a man tied to a post, and before him a firing-party, composed of twelve Bulgarian volunteers. Deadly pale looked the culprit, who was stripped to his shirt and baggy red breeches—Mattei Guebhard, for it was he—taken prisoner in the late action, by Stanley's regiment—baffled, checkmated, standing there in dishonour, the centre of thousands of stern and unpitying eyes.

To this end had his life come!

Discipline alone kept the troops silent; but the crowds of Servian peasantry and the camp-followers hooted and yelled at him, loading the air with opprobrious cries. No braggart was he then.

He made the sign of the cross repeatedly in the Greek manner, mechanically, or in a spirit of latent superstition, for religion he had none.

Fotheringhame heard only that he was a deserter and spy, yet, checking his horse, he looked on the scene with breathless interest, little knowing how prominent a part the culprit had recently paid in the life of his friend Cecil.

In attendance upon him was the old village pope of Palenka

in his bell-shaped black felt hat with long tabs floating behind, and a venerable beard spread over the breast of his glittering vestments. Guebhard smoked a cigar, and for a time preserved a bearing of indifference, till the priest withdrew and the words of command were given to the Bulgarians, who cocked their rifles, and his eyes were bound. Then, unable to stand erect from emotion or craven fear, his knees gave way under him, and his head fell forward, the lashings which bound him to the post alone supporting him partially.

The death-volley rang sharply in the morning air; soon all was over, and the troops were defiling past where the shattered corpse hung at the post, their colours flying and drums beating merrily, and from thence into their lines.

By this time Fotheringhame had conveyed Cecil to the hospital, and with difficulty secured the attendance of a surgeon, for all the medical men had their hands full.

The sights and sounds in the wards were more appalling than anything he had seen on the field; and the surgeons, with their coats off, shirt-sleeves rolled up, and red to the elbows in blood, looked like veritable butchers.

'Horrible work this, doctor,' said he to a fat, fussy little German; 'cutting off legs and arms with knife and saw, quietly and in cold blood.'

'*Ach Himmel!* you think it is better done with a sabre, while yelling like a devil broke loose!'

'In a charge—yes; but please look to my friend.'

Cecil was now stretched on a pallet, his tunic unbuttoned, and with his breast a mass of blood, a piteous sight he looked. A second doctor now came, and while they conferred in German, Fotheringhame felt his heart stand still.

'*Mein Herr*,' whispered one, looking up, 'there will be a crisis soon.'

'When?'

'When we have the bullet out.'

'I trust you have hope?'

'There is always hope while there is life,' replied the doctor,

turning aside while he carefully wiped a probe; 'but he has lost so much blood, and is so low, that if he rallies it will be little short of a miracle.'

The other doctor deemed the case a hopeless one, and a cry nearly escaped Fotheringhame when he saw Cecil's form convulsed by a spasm as the bullet was extracted, and a swoon came over him.

'If he should die in my hands—poor Cecil!' thought the kind-hearted fellow, in great misery of mind; 'or if I am only taking him home to die! That prediction about a violent death, what did it mean? Who the devil made it? Looks too deuced likely to happen!'

And so, while the soft and tender hands of the Sisters of Charity did all those little offices about Cecil that no wife, mother, or sister in blood could have done more ably or kindly, Fotheringhame smoked a cigar close by, full of thought and anxiety, while a long and deep sleep fell upon the patient, a sleep that was worth a hundred nostrums.

'Poor fellow! he is down in his luck, certainly,' thought Fotheringhame; ''gad, I shall rejoice to hear when the doctors think him safe round the corner, and we may start for home.'

When sense came completely back to Cecil, he knew not where he was, nor for some hours thereafter did he exactly comprehend all that had lately happened to him and passed around him; he had lost so much blood, and been thereby so giddy, weak, drowsy, and insensible.

His first recollections were of the battle—of supporting the field-battery, and the charges he had led ere he fell; then the night in the woody hollow—his thirst and the kites hovering over him!

Now he was in a handsome, lofty, and airy room, and on a pretty French couch; a soft flower-scented breeze came through an open window, the hangings of which were partly drawn; and he had also a sense of a woman flitting noiselessly about him, and by her plain black dress and the white band with the red cross on the left arm, her crimped cap and spotless white apron,

he recognised in her one of the German nurses or Sisters of Charity, who, the moment she caught his eye and saw him move, gave him a cooling and refreshing drink, glad to find symptoms of recovery in a poor sufferer whose mutterings alone had given her a clue to his wants, while she had felt her heart touched by the utterance of the ever-recurring name of 'Mary;' but her work was nearly done now, as she had nursed him back to health and something like strength.

'Where am I?' he asked, with a husky voice.

'In Belgrade, *mein Herr*.'

'Belgrade! with whom?'

'Friends; kind friends, who will take care of you now that the horrible war is all over.'

In a well-hung carriage procured by Fotheringhame from General Tchernaieff, Cecil, all unknown to himself, had been conveyed more than a hundred miles from the field of battle and from the crowded and pestilential hospitals thereby, and was now comfortably quartered in the Krone or La Couronne Hotel at Belgrade.

Cecil was greatly bewildered by hearing that he was in the capital of Servia, and was disposed to ask more questions; but his nurse told him that he must be patient, adding, while the tender light of a sweet and womanly soul lit up her eyes:

'And you must not talk, it is bad for your chest, Herr Captain; drink more of this—you cannot! Then I must feed you with a spoon.'

'You?'

'Yes,' and tenderly the blooming little fräulein raised his head on her soft arm, and made him partake of the medicated food the doctor had ordered.

'Now go to sleep,' said she; 'sleep and feed—feed and sleep, you naughty boy, and we soon shall have you in your saddle once more.'

He dozed off again, but tossed restlessly on his pillow, as dreams came to him now more distinctly than before.

'He has youth and strength, and pure good blood—at

least, what is left of it,' said the doctor, smilingly, to honest Fotheringhame, who was always hovering near; 'I believe in these—and such nurses as you, Sister Gretchen, with plenty of jellies and beef-tea—*ja—ja!*'

'Bravo, old fellow! you've turned the corner at last!' was the exclamation of Fotheringhame to Cecil, some days after this.

'You think so, dear Leslie,' replied Cecil, in a weak voice, as he held out a wasted hand to his friend; 'but I only fear that I am getting near the end now—the end of a sad and broken life!'

'Now don't talk this way, or I'll be off like a bird and leave you!' said Fotheringhame.

'How shall I ever be able to thank you for coming all the distance you have done, to look after a poor waif like me? And but for your so miraculously finding me, I must have perished—inevitably perished!'

'There was nothing very miraculous in it. I traced out the position, and by chance lighted upon an old sergeant, who showed me the way your horse had gone; I followed the track, and, thank God, heard your cry.'

'Another moment, that odious kite would have torn out my eyes. Oh, Heavens! I shall never forget, my dear Leslie, the horror of that helpless time! After leading my fellows to the last charge in support of the guns, I have no recollection of anything—I must have gone down like a shot!'

Fotheringhame thought that now the time was come when he could safely enlighten Cecil as to the change in his fortune, and elucidate the mysterious portions of Mary's half-obliterated letter—that he was Sir Pier's heir—her cousin, and that the obnoxious Hew had disappeared from the family group; and, as may easily be supposed, great was Cecil's bewilderment and wonder to hear of a discovery—a *dénouement* so singular.

Mary's cousin—the general's heir—heir to Eaglescraig and his baronetcy! Could such things be?

He had much to inquire about again and again, and much

to think of deeply now; and sedulously as his mother, in her widowhood and in her pride of heart, had kept all knowledge of his family, and even of his name, from him, innumerable things that occurred in their wandering life took a tangible form now, and the cause of many an emotion and occurrence that had puzzled him in the past time became apparent enough; and in his grateful heart a great pity mingled with the yearning memory of his mother.

'And now about yourself and Annabelle Erroll,' asked Cecil on one occasion.

'Only that we are to be married as soon as we get back, so make haste and get well, old fellow!' was the laughing reply of Fotheringhame.

The war in Servia was virtually over now; and even had it not been so, Cecil could have resigned now with honour, as Stanley did, who was also *en route* for England, with several other volunteers.

An armistice had been signed on the day after the last battle and the sword was sheathed in the valley of the Morava, and Milano IV. remains still prince, but not king, of Servia and Bosnia.

With the struggle between Russia and Turkey, on the soil of Servia, Cecil had done. Of what the former for ages has looked forward to—the destruction of the latter—a prophecy of extreme antiquity foretells the accomplishment—a prophecy uttered when, or by whom, no man knows; but eight centuries ago it was read on the brazen horse of an equestrian statue, then ages old, when brought to Constantinople from Antioch.

Though weak from the effects of his terrible wound, Cecil was recovering fast; while love and fortune seemed to smile alike upon him; and to him and Fotheringhame pleasant indeed was their journey from Semlin, on the famous Danube, to Monaco, so famous in the Hungarian annals for its terrible battle, and from thence homeward by Vienna and the Netherlands.

CHAPTER LXI.

'THE END CROWNS ALL.'

A YELLOW autumn moon in a deep blue sky was pouring a flood of light over the old 'Queen of the North,' throwing the giant shadows of her rock-built fortress far athwart the dark valley below, and of the ridgy masses of the old city of mediæval times, towering high above the long white terraces of the New Town, when Leslie Fotheringhame thankfully deposited his charge—the poor waif whom he had found dying on the bank of the Morava—in one of the many stately hotels in the vicinity of Princes Street; we say thankfully, for though Cecil was recovering, he was still weak enough to render the prediction of Count Palenka something unpleasant to remember.

'Now, Cecil, a bumper of Moselle, as a refresher after our long day's journey, and then I go to meet those at the railway, whom, I suppose, you will be right glad to see!' said Fotheringhame, ere he laughingly took his departure in a cab.

Cecil drained the wine, and looked around him, half fearing that he might be dreaming—and that the spacious room, the brilliant gaselier, the Turkey carpet, the tiger-skin before the stately white marble mantel-piece, the great mirror in which his own pallid face and eyes unnaturally bright with long suffering were reflected, might pass away. How much had he seen of misery, how much bitterness of thought, and how much peril had he undergone since last he had surroundings such as these!

Could it all be real, that within an hour perhaps, Mary's hands would be in his?

He approached one of the tall windows and looked out upon the night, and on the well-known scene, with all its familiar sights and sounds, with the moonlight streaming over steeple, tower, and dome—St. Giles's crown—the castle on its rock, so high in air that its lights seemed to mingle with the stars, and from it came the sound of the Cameronian drums, awaking the

echoes of turret and battery—the drums he would soon be following again; but the heavy sigh of supreme gratitude that escaped him reminded him by a pang of the wound in his chest, and he reeled giddily.

'I would that they were come,' he muttered. 'I knew not till now that I was still so weak,' he added, as he looked at his wasted hands.

The shadow or outline of a man's figure standing in the broad iron balcony without the window now fell suddenly on a window-blind. Cecil drew it up—threw open the sash abruptly, and found himself face to face with—Hew—Hew watching him!

He seemed shabby in dress and dissipated—his hair and moustache untrimmed; his eyes were bleary, his nose pimply, and his whole air and aspect were those of a sorely broken-down tippler.

Cecil, in utter repugnance, recoiled a pace, and an ugly expression flashed in the shifty and bilious-like eyes of Hew.

'You, here?' exclaimed Cecil.

'Yes—and I saw your arrival.'

'Are you living in this hotel, Hew?'

'Well—I am, in a manner of way,' he replied, sulkily: 'I am the billiard-marker!'

'The billiard-marker? Have you fallen so far?'

'Yes,' he replied, with a fierce grimace.

'You did me an infamous and awful injury, Hew, as your own confession has shown; but,' added Cecil, in the generosity of his nature and under the impulses of the time, 'I forgive it all now.'

'Thank you—how good!' sneered the other.

'Let us forget our feud—your feud, rather; but never let me look upon your face again.'

'Only children and fools, they say, forget.'

'And what have you to remember, pray?'

'All that you have come between, and me.'

'I have only come to my own.'

'Curse you!' exclaimed Hew, hoarsely and bitterly.

'You are a rancorous fellow—begone instantly!' replied Cecil, as he closed the window; and, feeling somewhat exhausted by the emotions this most unexpected interview stirred within him, he threw himself upon a sofa to await the return of Fotheringhame with those who were to accompany him, and after a time he forgot all about Hew and his close vicinity.

Weary and weak, a drowsiness encouraged by the warmth of the room stole over him, and, in spite of his efforts to keep awake, he fell into a drowsy state between sleeping and waking; but his mind was full of Mary, who would soon be with him—the real and imaginary so blended in his vision, but indistinctly, with that vacuity which makes the dreamer sigh when his fancies have become a memory.

Hew was still watching without, and unnoticed by the crowds that passed and repassed in the lighted street below. His heart was full of the bitterest rancour, envy, and rage. His mind was full of a species of madness—but a madness with a great deal of method and cunning in it.

He peeped in from time to time at the sleeper, with a gleam of intense malice in his stealthy eyes. Cecil was alone and unattended, and he lay there apart from all, and quite unheeded amid the bustle of the great hotel.

'There is not much life left in the fellow,' muttered Hew; 'a good shake—a squeeze of the windpipe, or a few more drops in his drink than I gave him at the ball, and Eaglescraig is mine!'

The door of the apartment was shut—if he would act, it must be done promptly. He would enter and leave the room by the French window, and after all was over, leave the balcony by another apartment, and repair at once to his usual scene of work, the billiard-room.

A blindness and giddiness, with a great terror, came over him for a moment; as one in a dream, he looked at the crowds passing below—the stars above; gave a last glance to assure himself that his avenue of escape was clear, and then with a

heart beating wildly, fired as it was by envy, avarice, malice, and all uncharitableness, he again drew near the window of Cecil's room and laid his stealthy hand upon it; but, as he did so, a deep hoarse malediction escaped in a kind of whisper, and shrinking back he stole softly away with all speed, and quitted the balcony—for he had seen a tableau that baffled his vengeance, and no doubt saved his soul from the perpetration of a terrible crime!

A little delay might have changed the fate of more than one person connected with our story; a great tragedy might have taken place almost without discovery, for had aught occurred to Cecil, it might have been attributed to his wounded and weak condition—so near was the prediction of Palenka being verified, not on the field of battle or in the carnage of charging squadrons, but in the quietude and seclusion of a fashionable hotel!

From the latter, the amiable Hew took his departure on the instant, and it is very unlikely that he will ever cross the path of Cecil again.

Dreams are usually independent of all details and coherency; but Cecil, as he dozed on, seemed to become gradually aware of the dear and familiar face, of one who smiled gently upon him, as she bent over him—her very life—her treasure, and delicious was the thrill the dream gave him.

The sense of a beloved presence became more vivid and defined. He heard his name called, and started to find Mary stooping over him, her veil thrown back, and her eyes—soft and loving at all times—softer now with an infinite yearning, as she saw how weak he was, and how hard had been the struggle between youth and Death!

'Mary, Mary, let me hear your voice again!' he said, as he folded her in his arms, yet with that expression of doubt in his haggard eye, as of one who feared the joy around him might be a dream and pass away.

'Take her to your heart, my boy—the same blood runs in your veins!' said old Sir Piers, all unused to act 'the heavy parent,' but his keen bright eyes were as humid and moist as

an old man's can well be, as he took Cecil's face between his withered hands, and gazed into his features as if he thought he could never look at them sufficiently; 'my own boy's eyes!' he exclaimed, with a kind of sob in his throat; 'my own boy's brow and lips—my poor Piers—you are his son—his son!'

A soft kiss was now laid upon his cheek—the kiss of Annabelle Erroll, and then the latter retired into the recess of a window, with her tall, dark lover Fotheringhame, who had no doubt a vast deal to tell her, and seemed to do so, very quietly and very softly, under the shadow of the curtains.

'My darling, my darling!' Cecil could but whisper again and again.

'Oh, Cecil—Cecil, whom I thought I was never—never to see again! How have I ever lived through all this!' she kept repeating; 'why did you go to Servia?'

'What mattered it where I went *then*—at the time, I mean!'

He gave a short sigh, as even her beloved cheek on his wounded chest made him wince.

'Egad, what a home-coming we'll have!' said the general; 'Rungeet entering Lahore will be nothing to it! Old John Balderstone, and Mrs. Garth, widow of Garth of Ours—you remember her, Cecil? will be mustering the tenants and everybody—old Tunley too—what [a Christmas we'll have! And there will be a bonfire on the old tower-head at Eaglescraig, that will light up the whole Firth of Clyde!'

But the lovers thought only of the future, which seemed so close and certain now.

Pillowed on Mary's breast—surrounded by friends and all the perfect safety of home and assured position, there was—to Cecil—a calm and delicious joy in existence now, after all the fierce whirl, the aching disappointment, and the wild excitement of his life recently.

THE END.

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